

## Notebook Export

# Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel

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## Preface

### Highlight(yellow) - Page 11 · Location 82

Marriage is not a human invention; it is a divine revelation. Its design never was our own made-up arrangement of infinite malleability. It was given to us, at the beginning of all things, as a brightly shining fixity of eternal significance.

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The Bible has its eye primarily on the ultimate marriage between the Son of God and his redeemed bride. That eternal romance is the biblical view of marriage, offering both instruction and hope for our own marriages today.

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Clearly we all have the freedom to do what we choose with our own God-given humanity. But we do not have the freedom to escape the consequences of our choices, nor may we rightly demand that others support our choices.

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I want to lead you on a brief journey of discovery from the beginning of the Bible to its end, because the Bible is a love story. It is not a hodgepodge of religious thoughts. The Bible unfolds as a complex but coherent narrative of God gathering a bride for his Son—and he found her on the wrong side of town, too. What a story!

## 1 Marriage in Genesis

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The first cosmos was created as the home of a young couple named Adam and Eve. The new cosmos will be created as the eternal home of the Son and his bride.

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It is not as though marriage is just one theme among others in the Bible. Instead, marriage is the wraparound concept for the entire Bible, within which the other themes find their places.

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We find our identity not downward in relation to the creation but upward in relation to God.

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The first claim of the Bible, then, setting the stage for marriage, is that manhood and womanhood are not our own cultural constructs. Human concepts are too small and artificial a context for the glory of our sexuality. Manhood and womanhood find their true meaning in the context of nothing less than the heavens and the earth, the cosmos, the universe, the entire creation. That is the first claim of the biblical love story.

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the delicate interplay between male head and female helper is not a mutation in human social evolution, to be replaced by later developments; it is a stroke of divine genius, original to our existence. Rightly understood and beautifully lived out, God's wise creation of head with helper is a permanent and glorious reality, not arbitrary or eccentric but traceable even up into ultimacy: "The head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God" (1 Cor. 11: 3). Headship did not come down to us historically as an artifact of oppressive patriarchy; it began in heaven and came down into this world creationally as a pathway to human flourishing.

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Moreover, before we give up on God's design as unworkable, we must understand that all aspects of manhood and womanhood, with marriage and sex and intimacy—these now fragile glories of human existence, were not created for this broken world. They were created for a perfect world, a safe world, far from our own, and are now brutalized and vandalized, partly by being misjudged.

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At every level of his being, a husband should be wholeheartedly devoted to his wife, loyal to his wife, steadfast toward his wife, as toward no other.

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the crucial events of the fall of mankind could have taken place in maybe five minutes. But every marriage is always just five minutes away from disaster. We today keep telling the same story over and over again. We can be oblivious to the true magnitude of our choices, the real issues at stake in our moment-by-moment lives. We realize too late how fateful our steps have been.

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What the Serpent understood, and what we modern people tend not to see, is that everything in human existence, including marriage, is most deeply a God issue. If God is good, then we should trust him and obey him in everything. If God is not good, then we have to find our own way in everything. But either way, we cannot think piecemeal. Whatever we may believe or not believe about God, our attitude toward him must be all or nothing.

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First, the tree is good for food. Its fruit hangs there, tantalizingly delicious. “It doesn’t look deadly to me,” she must have thought. Second, the tree is a delight to the eyes, offering aesthetic appeal, inviting deeper experience. Third, the tree is to be desired to make one wise. She can then be her own judge of truth and right. But good things—truly good things, and good at multiple levels—even good things go bad, if we have to disobey God to get them.

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The wife acting as the head, but not a wise head, and the husband acting as the helper, but not a wise helper—it was the breakdown of marriage that broke everything. The greatest glory in the universe (Genesis 1–2) became the greatest tragedy in the world (Genesis 3). And only the greatest love can restore us (Rev. 21: 1–5).

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We are told to “get things out into the open,” not for the sake of self-humiliation, but on the grounds that these “things” are very natural and we need not be ashamed of them. But unless Christianity is wholly false, the perception of ourselves which we have in moments of shame must be the only true one; and even Pagan society has usually recognized “shamelessness” as the nadir of the

soul. . . . A recovery of the old sense of sin is essential to Christianity. 17

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Nothing is more natural in our fallen world today than trying to build a happy marriage on a foundation of God avoidance. But it cannot work.

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Their hearts have changed toward God at a profound and permanent level. This human flaw—the way we break out in a rash at the approach of God—our allergy toward God is natural to us now the way a birth defect is natural and unchosen (Ps. 51: 5).

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What God says in verses 16–19 shapes our reality in ways we cannot overrule, no matter how clever our magic or advanced our science. By his massive words in the garden, God our judge confines all of human experience thereafter to enfeebling pain and final death. And wisdom counsels us to bow in deep acceptance and find eternal life right there in our pain, where we least expect it.

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If we hate God for imposing these limits on us, if we strive to re-create reality more to our liking, we will trend not toward freedom and hope but toward disgusting and impious degradations, and there is no depth to which we will not fall even further. But if we humbly bend to the sorrows and buffetings of this life, trusting God, we will be surprised to discover beauty where God has hidden it—not in our fantasies but in his realities. God's wise purpose in these solemn oracles of destiny is to draw us all back to his loving heart. Therefore, as we embrace the brokenness of life, we begin our journey back to God and healing.

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These sad words he declared in Genesis 3: 16 predict our cycle of dysfunction whenever a wife steps in to fill the void created by her husband's failure to care and provide, with the husband resenting his wife for the implied criticism of his own passivity and silently or aggressively punishing her for it.

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But what we must never forget is this: when we forsook our Father in the garden, it is not as though we offended him only; we jeopardized everything that we ourselves long for in our own deepest intentions. Whenever we walk away from God, we walk toward something inhumane, unsafe, life-depleting. To put it

yet another way, the only alternative to heaven is hell. There is no neutral ground of our own making, under our own control. That world exists nowhere.

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When God justly expelled us from the garden of Eden, he did not take this gift back. He let us keep his priceless gift, though we sometimes misuse it. But what every married couple needs to know is that their marriage is a remnant of Eden. This is why every marriage is worth working at, worth fighting for. A marriage filled with hope in God is nothing less than an afterglow of the garden of Eden, radiant with hope until perfection is finally restored.

## **2 Marriage in the Law, Wisdom, and Prophets**

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What the Bible records, it does not always condone.

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Wisdom teaches us that God gave us our sexuality both to focus our romantic joy and to unleash our romantic joy. When our desires are both focused and unleashed—both form and freedom—our sexual experience becomes wonderfully intensified. A marriage can flourish within both form and freedom, because sex is like fire. In the fireplace, it keeps us warm. Outside the fireplace, it burns the house down.

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Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: “Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.” Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates. (Prov. 31: 28–31) Her children rise up, they stand up, and they speak respectfully to their mother. They tell her why they love and admire her. Where did the children learn that? From their father: “He praises her” (v. 28).

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In this surprising way the prophets explain Israel’s favored status with the Lord, their own shocking betrayals of him, and his final judgment of them in Israel’s national decline and eventual collapse. The bride of God sinking to the level of a whore, destroying the most sacred marriage of all, is a major theme in the Prophets. 41

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There is a reason why the last two words of the Prophets are “utter destruction” (Mal. 4: 6). The marital union between the Lord and his people became so limited rather than all-encompassing, the relationship was so opposite to “one flesh,” the sanctity of their union was so extremely violated, that the judgment of God fell hard. It appeared that the sin of man had defeated the promises of God. Who could dare hold out hope, when Jerusalem lay in smoldering ruins, its walls broken down, its treasures looted, its temple desecrated, its people exiled, its mission defeated, God’s presence removed? Obviously, the marriage was over.

## 3 Marriage in the New Testament

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Jesus advances our understanding of marriage, according to Genesis 2: 24, in two ways. First, Jesus read the simple word “they” in “they shall become one flesh,” and he made its meaning clear beyond all doubt. That true marriage, as originally given in the garden of Eden, involves two people only, one man with one woman, which should have been obvious all along simply from the facts of the matter. But Solomon, a wise man in other respects, found a way around the plain meaning of the Genesis text, for he had seven hundred trophy wives (1 Kings 11: 3). Jesus did not approve of polygamy. He approved of the monogamy God had established for all time in Eden. So our Lord made the obvious still more obvious, leaving no “wobble room” at all, when he said, “The two shall become one flesh” (v. 5).<sup>43</sup> We therefore assert again that the biblical story is not crowded with multiple and equally legitimate models of marriage, so that its standard is unclear. Jesus himself settled the question. He meant to.

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Jesus shows that how the Bible begins must take precedence. This leads us to realize that the structure of the Bible as a whole shapes how we interpret its parts. The Bible starts with a glorious beginning (Genesis 1–2), then moves quickly to a catastrophic betrayal and precipitous decline (Genesis 3–11), and then to a growing body of divine promises of grace intermixed with many episodes of human failure (Genesis 12–Malachi 4), leading to Jesus in his life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension, the spread of the gospel out into the nations, his second coming, the final judgment, and the greater glory of his renewed creation (Matthew 1–Revelation 22). So the Bible is not flat literary terrain. The Bible is built as a growing narrative, with a trajectory of progressive revelation trending toward the renewal of all things. And the point is this: all the parts of the Bible along the way cannot be rightly understood if they are

detached from the grand narrative starting in the creation and culminating in Jesus. And it is the end that finally explains the beginning and the middle.

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The Quran is not structured like the Bible. The Sura “Women,” the fourth of 114 Suras, tells a Muslim man, “Marry such women as seem good to you, two, three, four,” and, “And those [wives] you fear may be rebellious admonish; banish them to their couches, and beat them.” 44 But the Quran does not take those instructions into greater light the way the Bible advances beyond the law of Moses. The structure of the Quran is such that having ruled in favor of polygamy and wife beating, there it stands, unresolved.

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Your marriage came to you with the touch of God upon it, and it remains dear to him.

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Here is another way to think about it. I try to drive carefully. But when I happen to borrow a friend’s car, I drive very carefully. I don’t want to damage the property of a friend and return it to him all banged up. Even so, our bodies are the personal property of someone else. The only way we could say, “Who does he think he is, telling me what to do with my body?”—the only way we could say that is by not belonging to him at all. Did he shed his blood to cover our sins? Has he given his Spirit to make us new? If so, then we should glorify him even in our physicality, especially our sexuality.

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We should not think that Christ and the church are the metaphor in this passage, but the reverse. Christ and the church are the reality of realities, and our Christian marriages are the metaphors.

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And we need not feel an improper pressure about this, as if our marriages must be perfect. The whole point is that no Christian marriage can be the ultimate human experience. But every faithful Christian marriage points beyond itself to the perfect union we all share with the Lord Jesus Christ. Our little metaphorical marriages can always draw strength from the real marriage we share with our Savior.

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For the husband, remember that God made Eve from Adam, for Adam, as his dear partner in life to help him follow the divine call. But now, in our broken world of today, deep in the heart of every wife is the self-doubt that wonders, “Do I please him? Am I the one he dreamed of and longed for? Will he love me to the end? Am I safe with this man I married? Will he cast me off? Even if we go the distance, will he get tired of me?” A wise husband will understand that that uncertainty, that question, is way down deep in his wife’s heart. And he will spend his life speaking into it, gently and tenderly communicating to her in many ways, “Darling, you are the one I want. I cherish you. I rejoice over you, as no other. The thought of living without you is horrible to me. I love the thought of growing old together with you, hand in hand all the way. I will hold you close to my heart until my dying day.” A wise husband prizes and praises his wife above all others. That is why the word love is in verse 33. Love breathes life into a woman.

### **Highlight(yellow) - Page 102 · Location 1401**

For the wife, remember that God made Adam first and put him in the garden with a job to do, a mission to fulfill, a mountain to climb. But now, in our broken world of today, deep in the heart of every man is the self-doubt that wonders, “Am I man enough to meet the challenge God has called me to? Can I fulfill my destiny? Won’t I end up failing? Is there any point in even trying?” That question is way down deep inside the heart of every husband. A wise wife will understand that. And she will spend her life speaking into it, communicating to her husband in many ways, “Honey, I believe in you. I know you can follow God’s call, by God’s grace, for God’s glory. The Lord is with you, and so am I. Let’s go for it!” A wise wife will never put her husband down or laugh at him but will greatly strengthen him and build him up, for God’s glory. He will accomplish more by the power of her respect than he ever could on his own. That is why the word respect appears in verse 33. Respect breathes life into a man.

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John contrasts “the great prostitute” (Rev. 17: 1), which represents this corrupt and seductive world where anything goes, with the pure bride. For the world at the end of history, the party’s over. For the bride entering eternity, the wedding celebration has finally begun and will never end. In verses 1–4 of Revelation 19, John hears heaven exploding with praise for God’s judgment upon the great prostitute. But God’s servants on earth erupt in nuclear-powered praises for the final coming of the kingdom (v. 6) and the longed-for beginning of the marriage (v. 7).