

S A C R E D  
M A R R I A G E

WHAT IF GOD DESIGNED MARRIAGE TO MAKE US  
HOLY MORE THAN TO MAKE US HAPPY?

GARY THOMAS

ZONDERVAN

*Sacred Marriage*

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# CONTENTS

1. THE GREATEST CHALLENGE IN THE WORLD . . . . .	9
<i>A Call to Holiness More Than Happiness</i>	
2. ROMANTICISM'S RUSE . . . . .	14
<i>How Marriage Points Us to True Fulfillment</i>	
3. FINDING GOD IN MARRIAGE . . . . .	28
<i>Marital Analogies Teach Us Truths about God</i>	
4. LEARNING TO LOVE . . . . .	39
<i>How Marriage Teaches Us to Love</i>	
5. HOLY HONOR . . . . .	51
<i>Marriage Teaches Us to Respect Others</i>	
6. THE SOUL'S EMBRACE . . . . .	70
<i>Good Marriage Can Foster Good Prayer</i>	
7. THE CLEANSING OF MARRIAGE . . . . .	82
<i>How Marriage Exposes Our Sin</i>	
8. SACRED HISTORY . . . . .	97
<i>Building the Spiritual Discipline of Perseverance</i>	
9. SACRED STRUGGLE . . . . .	123
<i>Embracing Difficulty in Order to Build Character</i>	
10. FALLING FORWARD . . . . .	145
<i>Marriage Teaches Us to Forgive</i>	

11. MAKE ME A SERVANT . . . . .	164
<i>Marriage Can Build in Us a Servant's Heart</i>	
12. SEXUAL SAINTS . . . . .	182
<i>Marital Sexuality Can Provide Spiritual Insights and Character Development</i>	
13. SACRED PRESENCE . . . . .	209
<i>How Marriage Can Make Us More Aware of God's Presence</i>	
14. SACRED MISSION . . . . .	228
<i>Marriage Can Develop Our Spiritual Calling, Mission, and Purpose</i>	
EPILOGUE: THE HOLY COUPLE . . . . .	244
<i>Acknowledgments</i> . . . . .	249
<i>Questions for Discussion and Reflection</i> . . . . .	251
<i>Notes</i> . . . . .	265

# THE GREATEST CHALLENGE IN THE WORLD

A Call to Holiness More Than Happiness

By all means marry. If you get a good wife, you'll become happy. If you get a bad one, you'll become a philosopher. *Socrates*

I'm going to cut him open.

Historians aren't sure who the first physician was who followed through on this thought, but the practice revolutionized medicine. The willingness to cut into a corpse, peel back the skin, pull a scalp off a skull, cut through the bone, and actually remove, examine, and chart the organs that lay within was a crucial first step in finding out how the human body really works.

For thousands of years, physicians had speculated on what went on inside a human body, but there was a reluctance and even an abhorrence to actually dissect a cadaver. Some men refrained out of religious conviction; others just couldn't get

over the eeriness of cutting away a human rib cage. While an occasional brave soul ventured inside a dead body, it wasn't until the Renaissance period (roughly the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries) that European doctors routinely started to cut people open.

And when they did, former misconceptions collapsed. In the sixteenth century, Andreas Vesalius was granted a ready supply of criminals' corpses, allowing him to definitively contradict assumptions about the human anatomy that had been unquestioned for a thousand years or more. Vesalius's anatomical charts became invaluable, but he couldn't have drawn the charts unless he was first willing to make the cuts.

I want to do a similar thing in this book—with a spiritual twist. We're going to cut open numerous marriages, dissect them, find out what's really going on, and then explore how we can gain spiritual meaning, depth, and growth from the challenges that lie within. We're not after simple answers—three steps to more intimate communication, six steps to a more exciting love life—because this isn't a book that seeks to tell you how to have a happier marriage. This is a book that looks at how we can use the challenges, joys, struggles, and celebrations of marriage to draw closer to God and to grow in Christian character.

We're after what Francis de Sales wrote about in the seventeenth century. Because de Sales was a gifted spiritual director, people often corresponded with him about their spiritual concerns. One woman wrote in great distress, torn because she wanted to get married while a friend was encouraging her to remain single, insisting it would be “more holy” for her to care for her father and then devote herself as a celibate to God after her father died.

De Sales put the troubled young woman at ease, telling her that, far from being a compromise, in one sense, marriage might be the toughest ministry she could ever undertake. “The state of marriage is one that requires more virtue and constancy than any other,” he wrote. “It is a perpetual exercise of mortification

... In spite of the bitter nature of its juice, you may be able to draw and make the honey of a holy life.”<sup>1</sup>

Notice that de Sales talks about the occasionally “bitter nature” of marriage’s “juice.” To spiritually benefit from marriage, we have to be honest. We have to look at our disappointments, own up to our ugly attitudes, and confront our selfishness. We also have to rid ourselves of the notion that the difficulties of marriage can be overcome if we simply pray harder or learn a few simple principles. Most of us have discovered that these “simple steps” work only on a superficial level. Why is this? Because there’s a deeper question that needs to be

THIS BOOK LOOKS AT HOW WE CAN USE THE CHALLENGES, JOYS, STRUGGLES, AND CELEBRATIONS OF MARRIAGE TO DRAW CLOSER TO GOD AND TO GROW IN CHRISTIAN CHARACTER.

addressed beyond how we can “improve” our marriage: What if God didn’t design marriage to be “easier”? What if God had an end in mind that went beyond our happiness, our comfort, and our desire to be infatuated and happy, as if the world were a perfect place?

What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy? What if, as de Sales hints, we are to accept the “bitter juice” because out of it we may learn to draw the resources we need with which to make “the honey of a holy life”?

This isn’t to suggest that happiness and holiness are contradictory. On the contrary, I believe we’ll live the happiest, most joy-filled lives when we walk in obedience. John Wesley once boldly proclaimed that it is not possible for a man to be happy who is not also holy, and the way he explains it makes much sense. Who can be truly “happy” while filled with anger, rage, and malice? Who can be happy while nursing resentment or envy? Who can be honestly happy while caught in the sticky compulsion of an insatiable lust or incessant materialism? The glutton may enjoy his food, but he does not enjoy his condition.

So we’re not anti-happiness; that would be silly. The problem I’m trying to address is that a “happy marriage” (defined

romantically and in terms of pleasant feelings) is too often the endgame of most marriage books (even Christian marriage books). This is a false promise. You won't find happiness at the end of a road named selfishness.

This is a book that looks and points *beyond* marriage. Spiritual growth is the main theme; marriage is simply the context. Just as celibates use abstinence and religious hermits use isolation, so we can use marriage for the same purpose—to grow in our service, obedience, character, pursuit, and love of God.

For centuries, Christian spirituality was virtually synonymous with celibate spirituality; that is, even married people thought we had to become like monks and nuns to grow in the Lord. We'd have to do the same spiritual exercises, best performed by single people (long periods of prayer that don't allow for child rearing or marital discussion, seasons of fasting that make preparing meals difficult for a family, times of quiet meditation that seem impossible when kids of any age are in the house), rather than seeing how God could use our marriages to help us grow in character, in prayer, in worship, and in service. Rather than develop a spirituality in which marriage serves our pursuit of holiness, the church focused on how closely married people could mimic "single spirituality" without neglecting their family. The family thus became an obstacle to overcome rather than a platform to spiritual growth.

The reason the marriage relationship is often seen as a selfish one is because our motivations for marrying often *are* selfish. But my desire is to reclaim marriage as one of the most selfless states a Christian can enter. This book sees marriage the way medieval writers saw the monastery: as a setting full of opportunities to foster spiritual growth and service to God.

You've probably already realized there was a purpose for your marriage that went beyond happiness. You might not have chosen the word *holiness* to express it, but you understood there was a transcendent truth beyond the superficial romance depicted in popular culture. We're going to explore that purpose. We're going to cut open many marriages, find

out where the commitment rubs, explore where the poisoned attitudes hide, search out where we are forced to confront our weakness and sin, and learn how to grow through the process.

We'll also look at what Scripture, church history, and the Christian classics can tell us. You'll find that the classics are amazingly relevant and that the past influences the present far more than many people think.

The ultimate purpose of this book is not to make you love your spouse more—although I think that will happen along the way; it's to equip you to love your God more and to help you reflect the character of his Son more precisely. At the very least, you'll have a new appreciation for the person with whom you have embarked on this journey.

I also pray it will help you to love your marriage more, appreciate your marriage more, and inspire you to become even more engaged in your relationship with your spouse. When you realize something is “sacred,” far from making it boring, it gives birth to a new reverence, a take-your-breath-away realization that something you may have been taking for granted is far more profound, far more life-giving and life-transforming, than you may ever have realized.

I *love* marriage, and I love *my* marriage. I love the fun parts, the easy parts, and the pleasurable parts, but also the difficult parts—the parts that frustrate me but help me understand myself and my spouse

on a deeper level; the parts that are painful but that crucify the aspects of me that I hate; the parts that force me to my knees and teach me that I need to learn to love with God's love instead of just trying harder. Marriage has led me to deeper levels of understanding, more pronounced worship, and a sense of fellowship that I never knew existed.

“Sacred” isn't my brand; it's my way of life. And applying it to my marriage has transformed every one of my days. I believe it can do the same for you.

THE ULTIMATE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK IS NOT TO MAKE YOU LOVE YOUR SPOUSE MORE; IT'S TO EQUIP YOU TO LOVE YOUR GOD MORE.

# ROMANTICISM'S RUSE

How Marriage Points Us to  
True Fulfillment

Like everything which is not the involuntary result of fleeting emotion but the creation of time and will, any marriage, happy or unhappy, is infinitely more interesting than any romance, however passionate.

*W. H. Auden*

While holiness as a goal of marriage may sound like a radically different view of marriage, the very concept of “romantic love,” which is celebrated in movies, songs, and novels, was virtually unknown to the ancients. There were exceptions — one need merely read *Song of Songs*, for instance — but taken as a whole, the concept that marriage should involve passion and fulfillment and excitement is a relatively recent development on the scale of human history, making its popular entry toward the end of the eleventh century.<sup>1</sup>

This is not to suggest that romance itself or the desire for

more romance is necessarily bad; after all, God created the romantic component of our brain chemistry, and good marriages work hard to preserve a sense of romance. But the idea that a marriage can survive on romance alone, or that romantic feelings are more important than any other consideration when choosing a spouse, has wrecked many a marital ship.

Romanticism received a major boost by means of the eighteenth-century Romantic poets—Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Blake—followed by their successors in literature, Byron, Shelley, and Keats. These poets passionately argued that it was a crime against oneself to marry for any reason other than “love” (which was defined largely by feeling and emotion), and the lives of many of them were parodies of irresponsibility and tragedy.

For example, one of the writers who embraced this romantic notion with fervor was the sensuous novelist D. H. Lawrence, whose motto was “With *should* and *ought* I shall have nothing to do!” Lawrence fell in love with Frieda Weekley, a married woman, and sought to woo Frieda away from her husband, as his “love” demanded he do. As part of his less-than-noble designs, Lawrence sent Frieda a note, proclaiming that she was the most wonderful woman in all of England.

Being married with three children and having already suffered a couple of affairs, Mrs. Weekley saw through Lawrence’s emotion and coolly replied that it was obvious to her he had not met many Englishwomen.<sup>2</sup>

In her startling and insightful essay on marriage written in the 1940s (titled, interestingly enough, “The Necessary Enemy”), twentieth-century writer Katherine Anne Porter bemoaned how “Romantic Love crept into the marriage bed, very stealthily, by centuries, bringing its absurd notions about love as eternal springtime and marriage as a personal adventure meant to provide personal happiness.”<sup>3</sup> The reality of the human condition is such that, according to Porter (and I agree), we must “salvage our fragments of happiness” out of life’s inevitable sufferings.<sup>4</sup>

Porter carefully explores the heights and depths of marriage, making the following observations about a young bride:

This very contemporary young woman finds herself facing the oldest and ugliest dilemma of marriage. She is dismayed, horrified, full of guilt and forebodings because she is finding out little by little that she is capable of hating her husband, whom she loves faithfully. She can hate him at times as fiercely and mysteriously, indeed in terribly much the same way, as often she hated her parents, her brothers and sisters, whom she loves, when she was a child . . . She thought she had outgrown all this, but here it was again, an element in her own nature she could not control, or feared she could not. She would have to hide from her husband, if she could, the same spot in her feelings she had hidden from her parents, and for the same no doubt disreputable, selfish reason: she wants to keep his love.<sup>5</sup>

With only a romantic view of marriage to fall back on, Porter warns, a young woman may lose her “peace of mind. She is afraid her marriage is going to fail because . . . at times she feels a painful hostility toward her husband, and cannot admit its reality because such an admission would damage in her own eyes her view of what love should be.”<sup>6</sup>

Romantic love has no elasticity to it. It can never be stretched; it simply shatters. Mature love, the kind demanded of a good marriage, *must* stretch, as the sinful human condition is such that all of us bear conflicting emotions. “Her hatred is real as her love is real,” Porter explains of the young wife.<sup>7</sup> This is the reality of the human heart, the inevitability of two sinful people pledging to live together, with all their faults, for the rest of their lives.

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A wedding calls us to our highest and best—in fact, to almost impossible—ideals. It’s the way we *want* to live. But marriage reminds us of the daily reality of living as sinful human beings in a radically broken world. We aspire after love but far too often descend into hate and apathy.

Any mature, spiritually sensitive view of marriage must be built on the foundation of mature love rather than romanticism. But this immediately casts us into a countercultural pursuit.

In his classic work *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis satirically ridicules our culture's obsession with romanticism. The demon Screwtape, a mentor to the demon Wormwood, gloats:

Humans who have not the gift of [sexual abstinence] can be deterred from seeking marriage as a solution because they do not find themselves "in love," and, thanks to us, the idea of marrying with any other motive seems to them low and cynical. Yes, they think that. They regard the intention of loyalty to a partnership for mutual help, for the preservation of chastity, and for the transmission of life, as something lower than a storm of emotion.<sup>8</sup>

I think most of us who have been married for any substantial length of time realize that the romantic roller coaster of courtship eventually evens out to the terrain of a Midwest interstate—long, flat stretches with an occasional overpass. When this happens, couples respond in different ways. Many will end their relationship and try to re-create the passionate romance with someone else. Other couples will descend into a sort of marital guerrilla warfare as each partner blames the other for personal dissatisfaction or lack of excitement. Some couples decide to simply "get along." Still others may opt to pursue a deeper meaning, a spiritual truth hidden in the enforced intimacy of the marital situation.

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We can run from the challenges of marriage—as doctors did from the human body, refusing to cut open the cadavers and really look at what was going on—or we can admit that every marriage presents these challenges and asks us to address

them head-on. If we find that the same kinds of challenges face every marriage, we might assume God designed a purpose in this challenge that transcends something as illusory as happiness.

This book looks for that purpose and meaning and asks this question: How can we discover in the challenges of marriage the opportunities to learn more about God, grow in our understanding of him, and learn to love him more?

Numerous married couples have opened up their lives for us in this book, so I suppose it's only fair that I should allow my own marriage to be dissected first.

## AN UNEXPECTED ENGAGEMENT

Lisa and I often wonder what would have happened if she had said yes.

During a free afternoon at a college campus ministry retreat when we were still dating, I asked Lisa to join a group of us for a round of Frisbee golf.

"No thanks," Lisa said. "I think I'll go for a walk instead."

She had recently returned from a summerlong mission trip to Mexico, and this retreat was supposed to be a time when Lisa and I could reconnect. We had known each other since junior high and had been dating for about a year, and we were getting "serious." Unknown to Lisa, I had asked my best friend, Rob Takemura, to begin praying about whether I should ask Lisa to marry me. And unknown to me, Lisa and her mother had spent a Saturday afternoon the week before looking at wedding dresses, "just in case" Lisa should ever need one.

I was somewhat frustrated that Lisa wasn't being cooperative, so I said, "Fine, I won't play Frisbee golf either."

"You can," Lisa said. "I don't mind walking alone."

"No, I'll go with you," I said.

We walked along the river, set inside a stunning valley on the outskirts of Glacier National Park, and talked for about forty-five minutes. Suddenly, I stopped skimming rocks, and virtually out of nowhere I said to Lisa, "I want to marry you."

Lisa's mouth dropped open.

"Is that a proposal?" she asked, astonished.

I shook my head yes, just as astonished as she was. Lisa came up and hugged me.

"Is that an acceptance?" I asked, and Lisa nodded in the affirmative.

"Whew," she said after a brief moment. "Imagine if I had agreed to play Frisbee."

We laughed about it and then experienced one of the most intense times emotionally I've ever known. There was a strange, almost mystical commingling of souls. Something was going on inside us, around us, and through us that superseded any physical connection. It was somehow deeper, more meaningful, and more amazing than anything we had ever experienced.

Over the next nine months, we made plans, as any engaged couple does. We talked about mission work, family, seminary, serving God—you name it. It was an intense time, and we often prayed, "Lord, wherever you want to take us, however you want to use us, we're all yours."

We never slept together until our wedding night, so our honeymoon was a rather intoxicating experience, but once the honeymoon was over, reality immediately set in like a dense Seattle fog.

Because I was planning to save up money for seminary, we spent our first few months living in a very tiny home, offered to us rent-free by a family friend. I left for work two days after we got back, and Lisa was stranded in a small community, out in the middle of nowhere, and she began to cry.

It was a sunny day, so she called me at work and asked if I could come home early so we could drive to a lake. I thought she was crazy. "I can't just leave work because the weather's nice!" I protested. "Besides, I just started this job!"

"Well, what's the use of getting married if I see you less now than when we were engaged?" she complained.

*What's the use, indeed?*

Fast-forward ten years. We had three small children, two of them in diapers. I was working for a Christian ministry, and we were still “just making it” financially, snuggled into a town house in northern Virginia. We were about to enter our Friday-night ritual—laundry and a rented movie.

“What do you want to watch?” I asked Lisa as I gathered my keys and headed out the door.

“Oh, how about a romantic comedy?” Lisa answered.

I cringed. The last three videos we had watched together had been romantic comedies. I couldn’t bear to watch another impossibly beautiful couple “meet cute” under extremely improbable circumstances, fall in love, get in a fight, and then spend sixty minutes falling back in love again.

I sighed, looked at Lisa, and said. “I’m sorry. I just can’t do it. I have to see at least one building blow up and one car crash. If I can find something that has a little romance to add to that, I’ll see what I can do.”

I took three steps out the door, then thought to myself, *When did “Please, God, change the world through us” suddenly become “Should we watch Arnold Schwarzenegger or Julia Roberts?”* I didn’t remember any fork in the road or any flashing neon signs that pointed in that direction, but somehow, somewhere, it had happened.

WHAT WAS THIS THING  
CALLED MARRIAGE?  
HOW HAD I ENDED  
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I remembered the intensity of the night on which we had become engaged, the joyful exploration of our honeymoon, filling out a preliminary application for a mission organization, bringing our first child home—but now, ten years later, we

had “evolved” into spending Friday nights watching other people fall in love according to the machinations of a Hollywood script.

That night I didn’t have any answers, but taking an honest look at my situation definitely shook me awake. *What was this thing called marriage? How had I ended up here? Was there no more purpose to it than this?*

## "IT IS GOOD FOR A MAN NOT TO MARRY"

I became a Christian at a very young age. In truth, I can scarcely remember a moment when God was not an active and conscious presence in my life. Because of this, I felt drawn to Jesus early on.

I was drawn to more than Jesus, however; I also remember being drawn to girls. I had a pretty big crush on a dark-haired girl *in kindergarten!* The first time I actually held hands with a girl was in fifth grade. Tina and I rolled around the skating rink, both of us blushing as the Carpenters' melodious harmonies described us well: "I'm On Top of the World." It sure felt like it!

As I grew older, both of these movements—toward Jesus and toward females—sometimes created an uneasy tension. The man I most admired, the one person on whom I wanted to model my life was a *single man*. As a big fan of the Christian classics—ancient books focused on building intimacy with God—I was fully aware of the long-standing tradition of celibacy—monks and nuns who lived out their dedication to God by pledging to abstain from marriage and sex. Because I knew their love for God was so intense, part of me wished I could embrace this; I wanted to be sold-out for Christ, and in college I struggled with the apostle Paul's words, "It is good for a man not to marry" (1 Corinthians 7:1, as found in the 1984 edition of the NIV).<sup>9</sup>

In fact, there is much in Christian history that has unofficially (and at times blatantly) considered married believers to be second-class Christians who compromised their integrity or were too weak to contain their sexual urges. Augustine thought he was being charitable when he wrote, referring to the intent to procreate, "Marital intercourse makes something good out of the evil of lust."<sup>10</sup> Scripture may be infallible, but Christian history isn't, and unfounded prejudices do exist.

There's no question that the "first pope," Peter, was married. (Jesus couldn't very well have healed Peter's mother-in-law if Peter didn't have a wife!) But there is also evidence in

Scripture (1 Timothy 5:9–12) that during the first century young widows were already taking vows of celibacy. By AD 110, celibates could take vows that mirrored marital vows. This became a little more institutionalized so that by the third century, lifelong vows of celibacy were not uncommon. By the fourth century, such vows were commemorated by a full liturgical celebration.<sup>11</sup>

Although Christianity was born out of Judaism, a religion in which marriage was considered a religious duty (one rabbi suggested that a man who does not marry is not fully a man),<sup>12</sup> it wasn't long until married believers were scarcely an afterthought during centuries of writing on spiritual theology (studying how Christian believers grow in their faith, learn to pray, and draw closer to God). Most of the Christian classics were written *by* monks and nuns *for* monks and nuns. The married could at best feebly try to simulate a single pursuit of God; the thought of pursuing God *through* marriage wasn't really given serious consideration; instead, the emphasis was largely on pursuing God *in spite of* marriage.

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I carried some of this baggage into my own relationship, but early on, my eyes were opened to a different reality. I remember my brother asking me a few questions about what marriage was like. I thought for a moment and said, “If you want to be free to serve Jesus, there’s no question—stay single. Marriage takes a lot of time.

But if you want to become more like Jesus, I can't imagine any better thing to do than to get married. Being married forces you to face some character issues you'd never have to face otherwise.” I had begun to realize I could further pursue God through marriage and not just in spite of it. Marriage didn't need to hold me back from my spiritual goals; it could actually help me reach them.

Jesus, of course, was celibate his entire life, so it's somewhat

ironic to suggest that marriage is the preferred route to becoming more like him. But Jesus did live in a family, and, as Betsy Ricucci points out, that's all he had done at the time the Father proclaimed, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). "What had Jesus done to receive such praise? Nothing but live in his own home, honoring his parents and serving his father's carpentry business. Apparently that was enough to please God."<sup>13</sup>

Family life is clearly not a compromise, and after you've been married for a while, you realize that the emphasis on celibacy is slightly overblown. All things considered, the sexual aspect takes up just a fraction of a married couple's time. I was the first of my group of friends to get married, and I remember one of them asking me if it was still okay to just "drop in" unannounced.

"Oh, you better call first," I said gravely, capturing his attention. "Married couples walk around naked all day long, you know."

For a second, I almost had him!

The real transforming work of marriage is the twenty-four-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week commitment. This is the crucible that grinds and shapes us into the character of Jesus Christ. Instead of getting up at 3:00 a.m. to begin prayer in a monastery, the question becomes, "Who will wake up when the baby's diaper needs changing?"

Marriage calls us to an entirely new and selfless life. This insight occurred to me some years ago when Lisa and the kids were traveling while I stayed home and worked. For the first time ever, it seemed, I had a free Saturday. For as long as I could remember, I had awakened each weekend and talked over with Lisa what the family would do; I almost didn't know how to ask the question—what do *I* want to do? Yet that was the question I had asked myself as a single man virtually every Saturday before I was married.

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Any situation that calls me to confront my selfishness has enormous spiritual value, and I slowly began to understand that the real purpose of marriage may not be happiness as much as it is holiness. Not that God has anything against happiness or that happiness and holiness are mutually exclusive, but looking at marriage through the lens of holiness began to put it into an entirely new perspective for me.

### “BUT SINCE SEXUAL IMMORALITY IS OCCURRING”

In this regard, I find it fascinating that just after Paul said, “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman,” he follows it up with these words: “But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband” (1 Corinthians 7:2).

Though this passage refers to sexual relations, we can extend the principle to reveal truth beyond physical intimacy. Since there is so much immorality within us—not just lust, but selfishness, unrighteous anger, control mongering, and even hatred—we should enter into a close relationship with one other person so we can work on those issues in the light of what our marriage relationship will reveal to us about our behavior and our attitudes. In other words, not only is marriage a way for God to redeem us sexually; it is also a means by which God can redeem us in other areas of character.

I found a tremendous amount of immaturity within me that my marriage directly confronted. The key was that I had to change my view of marriage. If the purpose of marriage is simply to make me happy and enjoy an infatuation (which neuroscience suggests lasts a mere twelve to eighteen months), then I’d have to get a new marriage every two or three years. But if I really wanted to see God transform me from the inside out, I’d need to concentrate on changing *myself* rather than on changing *my spouse*. In fact, you might even say, the more difficult my spouse proved to be, the more opportunity I’d have to

grow. Just as physical exercise needs to be somewhat strenuous, so relational exercise may need to be a bit vigorous to truly stress-test the heart.

I didn't decide to focus on changing myself so I could have a tension-free marriage or so I'd be happier or even more content in my marriage. Instead, I adopted the attitude that marriage is one of many life situations that helps me draw my sense of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment *from God*. Lisa can't make me happy, not in an ultimate sense. Certainly we have some great times together, and she is a wonderful wife, exceeding my dreams—but these great times are sprinkled with (and sometimes seem to get buried in) the demands, challenges, and expectations of paying the bills on time, disciplining children, earning a living, and keeping a house clean.

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I guess what I'm after is a quieter fulfillment, a deeper sense of meaning, a fuller understanding of the purpose behind this intense, one-on-one, lifelong relationship. As a man who believes his primary meaning comes from his relationship with God, I want to explore how marriage can draw me closer to God.

There's another reason to stress this: Marriage, for all of us, is temporary in the light of eternity. The truth is, my and Lisa's relationships with God will outlive our marriage. Most likely the time will come when either Lisa or I precede the other into eternity. The remaining spouse will be left alone, no longer married—perhaps even eventually married to someone else.

For the Christian, marriage is a penultimate rather than an ultimate reality. Because of this, both of us can find even more meaning by pursuing God together and by recognizing that he is the one who alone can fill the spiritual ache in our souls. We can work at making our home life more pleasant and peaceable; we can explore ways to keep sex fresh and fun; we can

make superficial changes that will preserve at least the appearance of respect and politeness. But what both of us crave more than anything else is to be intimately close to the God who made us. If that relationship is right, we won't make such severe demands on our marriage, asking each other to compensate for spiritual emptiness. If what we desire most doesn't satisfy us, we will never be satisfied, even when our "desires" have been met! That's why finding our fulfillment in God is the cornerstone of a satisfied life. We can harm our marriages by asking too much of them.

Unfortunately, as a fallible human being I can't possibly appreciate Lisa the way God appreciates her. I can't even begin to understand her the way she longs to be understood. I'd get bored with myself if I was married to me, so it only makes sense that Lisa might occasionally be bored—or at least grow weary—of living with me.

One thing is sure: Lisa can't look to me to be God for her. And even when I try to love her like only God can love her, I fail every time and on every count. I give it my best, but I fall short every day.

## LOOKING FOR LOVE IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

We need to remind ourselves of the ridiculousness of looking for something from other humans that only God can provide. Our close friends have a son named Nolan. When he was just four years old, he saw me carrying some large boxes and asked me in all sincerity, "Gary, are you strongest or is God strongest?"

His dad laughed a little too hard at that one. And of course we adults think it's absurd to compare our physical strength with God's. But how many of us adults have then turned around and asked, perhaps unconsciously, "Are you going to fulfill me, or will God fulfill me?" For some reason, *that* question doesn't sound as absurd to us as the one about physical strength, but it should.

I believe that much of the dissatisfaction we experience in marriage comes from expecting too much from it. Though marriage is an amazing institution that reflects God's creative genius, when we want to get the largest portion of our life's fulfillment from our relationship with our spouse, that's asking too much. God didn't design marriage to compete with himself but to point us to himself. Yes, without a doubt there should be moments of happiness, meaning, and a general sense of fulfillment. And, of course, seeking God *together*, through our marriage, is certainly fulfilling in itself. But my wife can't be God, and I was created with a spirit that craves God. Anything less than God, and I'll feel an ache.

Now this is where it gets *really* interesting. Looked at in this light, rather than competing with or impeding our walk with God, marriage can actually point us *to* God. This is a big enough thought that it deserves a chapter all its own.

# FINDING GOD IN MARRIAGE

Marital Analogies Teach Us  
Truths about God

[Marriage] is the merciless revealer, the great white searchlight turned on the darkest places of human nature. *Katherine Anne Porter*

For about a decade after college, I joined eight of my former classmates for an annual weekend retreat. On one particular retreat, a good friend pulled me aside and mentioned that he was considering returning home that night; he and his wife were hoping to conceive another child, and by his wife's calculations the time was right.

"Do it," I urged him. "You can be back by breakfast."

"I don't know . . .," he said hesitantly.

"Do it," I said more strongly, and another friend weighed in with his support.

Finally, he gave in and went home. That night a child was conceived.

I look at that child now and smile, wondering if he'll ever know how close he came to not being (and how much he owes me!). There are few more dizzying realities of life than cooperating with God to produce another human being. If my friend and his wife had waited another month, perhaps they would have had a girl or a shorter boy or a boy with darker hair. It's amazing.

This aspect of the marital experience—cooperating with God to bring children into being—should be particularly meaningful for Christians (and a key reason that having difficulty conceiving can be

so painful to so many couples). The picture of God as Creator is central to his authority, identity, and purpose. In fact, the Bible is framed around the fact that God is Creator. The first thing we learn about God in the book of Genesis is that he created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1); the last image of the New Testament shows God creating a new heaven and a new earth. When God says, “I am making everything new!” (Revelation 21:5), the word *making* is in the present tense. It's an ongoing process. God walks into eternity creating.

This is just one of several analogies that connect various aspects of marriage with our understanding of God. A giant thread runs throughout Scripture comparing God's relationship to his people with the human institution of marriage. In this chapter, we'll explore how these various analogies use the experience of marriage to teach us valuable truths about the nature of God. Through the experience of being married, we can come to know God in new ways.

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## DIVINE ROMANCE

The prophet Hosea leads us into a startling reality—that God views his people as a husband views his wife: “‘In that day,’ declares the LORD, ‘you will call me “my husband”’; you will

no longer call me “my master.” . . . I will betroth you to me forever” (Hosea 2:16, 19). Think about the difference between a husband and a master—and all that these images conjure up in your mind. God wants us to relate to him with an obedience fueled by love and intimacy, not by self-motivated fear, and with a loyalty to a divine-human relationship, not a blind adherence to “principles.” A husband harbors a passion toward his wife that is absent in a master toward his slave.

How do you view God—as a master or as a husband?

Isaiah uses marital imagery to stress how God rejoices in his people: “As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you” (Isaiah 62:5). We live in a world in which many people are simply too busy or too preoccupied to notice us. But God *delights* in us. We make his supernatural heart skip a beat.

At times, Jesus himself employed this marital imagery, referring to himself as the “bridegroom” (Matthew 9:15) and to the kingdom of heaven as a “wedding banquet” (Matthew 22:1–14). This picture is carried over into the culmination of earthly history, as the book of Revelation talks about “the wedding of the Lamb” in which “his bride has made herself ready” (Revelation 19:7).

The breakdown of spiritual fidelity is often depicted with marital analogies as well. Jeremiah compares idolatry with adultery: “I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries” (Jeremiah 3:8). Jesus picked up on this same imagery, referring to an “adulterous” generation (Mark 8:38). In context, Jesus is not attacking human sexual foibles; he is agonizing over a spiritually unfaithful nation that is violating its divine marriage to God.

Throughout Christian history, teachers have explored the similarities between the marital union and the various mysteries of faith that also involve a union: Besides the Trinity there is the joining of divinity and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ; the Eucharist, in which the bread and the wine are joined to signify the body and blood of Christ; Christ’s union with his church; and other similar analogies.

Ruminating on these analogies is not merely amusing word-play. For Christians seeking to gain spiritual insight from their marriage, these analogies provide the necessary ingredients for serious, contemplative reflection. The reason God became flesh was so that we might know him. Correspondingly, God did not create marriage just to give us a pleasant means of repopulating the world and providing a steady societal institution for the benefit of humanity; he planted marriage among humans as another signpost pointing to his own eternal, spiritual existence.

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As humans with finite minds, we need the power of symbolism in order to gain understanding. By means of the simple relationship of a man and a woman, the symbol of marriage can call up virtually infinite meaning. This will happen only when we use our marriage to *explore* God. If we are consumed with highlighting where our spouses are falling short, we will miss the divine mysteries of marriage and the lessons it has to teach us.

In the next section, we're going to accent one particular analogy to showcase how these life-pictures can bring together our marriage and our faith and also teach us about the purpose of marriage. While future chapters may seem more "practical," it's important to briefly explore the doctrine behind Christian marriage and what makes the marriages of believers different from the marriages of unbelievers. This difference is showcased in the preeminent marital analogy of Christ and his church.

## RECONCILIATION

There's an old rabbinical story about how the spot was chosen for God's holy temple. Two brothers worked a common field and a common mill. Each night they divided whatever grain they had produced and took their own portion home.

One brother was single, and the other was married with a large family. The single brother decided that his married brother, with all those kids, certainly needed more grain than he did, so at night he secretly crept over to his brother's granary and gave him an extra portion. The married brother realized that his single brother didn't have any children to care for him in his old age. Concerned about his brother's future, he got up each night and secretly deposited some grain into his single brother's granary.

One night they met halfway between the two granaries, and each brother realized what the other was doing. They embraced, and as the story goes, God witnessed what happened and said, "This is a holy place—a place of love—and it is here that my temple shall be built." The holy place is that spot where God is made known to his people, "the place where human beings discover each other in love."<sup>1</sup>

Marriage can be that holy place, the site of a relationship that proclaims God's love to this world. Notice what makes this story so moving: two individuals who have greater empathy for the difficulties in each other's situation rather than in their own. Selfish marriage is the opposite: each partner feels their own pain more intensely and their spouse's pain callously.

For all their ambivalence about whether marriage is an inferior state, the early church fathers at least recognized that the analogy of reconciliation is the highest aim of marriage, pointing as a sign to the union of Christ with his church. Paul explores this theme in his letter to the Ephesians (5:22–33).

One of these early thinkers, Augustine (AD 354–430), suggested three benefits of marriage: offspring, faith (fidelity), and sacrament. Of the three benefits, he clearly points to the latter (sacrament) as the greatest. This is because it is possible to be married without either offspring or faith, but it is not possible to be (still) married without indissolubility, which is what a sacrament points toward. As long as a couple is married, they continue to display—however imperfectly—the ongoing commitment between Christ and his church. Thus, simply "sticking it out" becomes vitally important.

Centuries after Augustine, Anglican Reformers responded to these three blessings with three “causes.” An early (1549) prayer book suggests that marriage is for procreation, a remedy against sexual sin, and mutual comfort.<sup>2</sup> This last element unfortunately replaced the sacramental aspect of marriage (namely, showcasing Christ and his church) with something much more pedestrian (namely, relational comfort).

Knowing *why* we are married and should stay married is crucial. The key question is this: Will we approach marriage from a God-centered view or a self-centered view? In a self-centered view, we will maintain our marriage as long as our earthly comforts, desires, and expectations are met. In a God-centered view, we preserve our marriage because it brings glory to God and points a sinful world to a reconciling Creator.

More than seeing marriage as a mutual comfort, we must see it as a word picture of the most important news humans have ever received—that there is a divine relationship between God and his people. Paul explicitly makes this analogy in his letter to the Ephesians. You’ve probably read these words (or heard these words quoted) dozens, if not hundreds, of times: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5:25–27).

WE PRESERVE OUR MARRIAGE BECAUSE IT BRINGS GLORY TO GOD AND POINTS A SINFUL WORLD TO A RECONCILING CREATOR.

Though theologically I am on the side of the Protestants, I must declare to my early Anglican brothers that I believe it is unfortunate and sad when something as profound as living out an analogy of Christ and his church is reduced to experiencing this relationship as merely something that will help us avoid sexual sin, keep the world populated, and provide a cure for loneliness.

In fact, both the Old and New Testaments use marriage as a central analogy—the union between God and Israel (Old

Testament) and the union between Christ and his church (the New Testament). Understanding the depth of these analogies is crucial, as they will help us determine the very foundation on which a truly Christian marriage is based. If I believe the primary purpose of marriage is to model God's love for his church, I will enter this relationship and maintain it with an entirely new motivation, one hinted at by Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians: "So we make it our goal to please him" (2 Corinthians 5:9). The goal of my marriage will be to please God.

#### WHAT MAKES GOD HAPPY?

Paul answers a lot of questions for us when he writes, "We make it our goal to please him." Ask ten people on the street what their goal in life is, and you'll get an amazing variety of answers.

For the Christian, Paul couldn't be clearer: his "consuming ambition, the motive force behind all he does,"<sup>3</sup> is to *please God*. But Paul doesn't just say pleasing God is *his* "consuming ambition"; he assumes it will be *ours* as well: "We make it our goal to please him."

When something is the motive force behind all we do, it drives every decision we make. And Paul is crystal clear: The first question we should ask ourselves is, "Will this be pleasing to Jesus Christ?"

The first purpose in marriage—beyond happiness, sexual expression, the bearing of children, companionship, mutual care and provision, or anything else—is to please God. The challenge, of course, is that it is utterly *selfless* living; rather than asking, "What will make me happy?" we are told that we must ask, "What will make God happy?" And just in case we don't grasp it immediately, Paul underscores it a few verses later: "Those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Corinthians 5:15).

I have no other choice as a Christian. I owe it to Jesus Christ to live for him, to make him my consuming passion and the driving force in my life. To do this, I have to die to my own

desires daily. I have to crucify the urge that measures every action and decision around what is best for me. Paul is eloquent about this fact: “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body” (2 Corinthians 4:10).

Just as Jesus went to the cross, so I must go to the cross, always considering myself as carrying around “the death of Jesus” so that his new life—his motivations, his purposes, his favor—might dominate in everything I do.

This reality calls me to look at my spouse through Christian eyes: “From now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view” (2 Corinthians 5:16). The reason is clear: “If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (verse 17). Part of this new identity is a new ministry, one that is given to *every Christian*, as it is inherent in the person of Jesus Christ: “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (verse 18).

Think about this. The very nature of Christ’s work was a reconciling work, bringing us together again with God. Our response is to become reconcilers ourselves. C. K. Barrett defines reconciliation as “to end a relation of enmity, and to substitute for it one of peace and goodwill.”<sup>4</sup>

Clearly Paul is talking about carrying the message of salvation. But we cannot discuss with any integrity the ending of “a relation of enmity” and the dawning of “peace and goodwill” if our marriages are marked by divorce, fighting, and animosity. Everything I am to say and do in my life is to be supportive of this gospel ministry of reconciliation, and this commitment begins by displaying reconciliation in my personal relationships, especially in my marriage.

If my marriage contradicts my message, I have sabotaged the goal of my life, which is to be pleasing to Christ and to

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