

Marriage part 1

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] What is marriage? How difficult is that question? On a scale of one to ten, I don't know, I would put it at a three maybe. It's not that complicated really. Or am I perhaps missing something?

On Tuesday afternoon, I endured a couple of hours of the debate at Westminster on the marriage, same-sex couples bill. It was my intention to listen to the debate from start to finish, but that proved beyond me, and I threw in the towel after a couple of hours.

I imagine that one or two of the 400 MPs who voted in favor of the bill would be able to provide a working definition of marriage that was coherent and credible, even if I disagreed with it.

Now, I'm willing to be corrected. I didn't listen to the whole debate, but I think the best they could come up with was that marriage is the coming together of two people who love each other.

Now, I'm not saying that that isn't the case, but that was the extent of the definition that we were provided with. I almost expected somebody to burst into song with a rendition of love and marriage, love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage, but alas, that was not to be.

[1 : 3 4] It is, of course, a serious question. What is marriage? Those of us who would defend so-called traditional marriage and consequently, I would say necessarily, are opposed to so-called same-sex marriage need to be able to give clear reasons for our stance. In the absence of good reasons, the accusations of bigotry and homophobia would be justified. I think the best approach is to have a clear understanding of what marriage as designed by God is. Much better to know what we are in favor of than to have a long list of what we are opposed to. That reminds me of what a friend who worked as a bank teller once told me about the training they received to detect counterfeit notes. The training, apparently, certainly where this friend worked, was entirely focused on ensuring an intimate knowledge and familiarity with genuine bank notes, rather than being exposed to any number of examples of counterfeit bills. And I think the logic of the approach is evident. If you know the real thing, you will be able to quickly detect a bill that falls short, however seemingly similar. And that principle can be applied to the question of marriage. If you know what the real thing is, you will be able to identify any counterfeit version. Now, the passage that we'll be considering today we find in Genesis,

Genesis chapter 2. We've read the verses in question, and we will be particularly focusing on the second reading in chapter 2 from verse 18 through to verse 25. I want to set out clearly what I intend to do, and what I will begin to say is to stress or to clarify what I'm not going to do this morning.

What I'm not going to do is give a sermon or lecture on the Bible's teaching on marriage, drawing on material to be found throughout the Bible. That would be a useful exercise, but it's not what I'm going to do this morning. Rather, what I am going to do or endeavor to do is identify aspects or features of marriage as designed by God as they are to be found in our passage, a passage that is, without doubt, the single most important passage on marriage in the whole Bible.

I will identify these features in the order that they appear in the passage, rather than try and systematize in a more structured way, the relevant material of the passage. So, even as we limit ourselves to this passage, what we're going to do is simply go through the passage. And as we do, we will, in the order that they appear, identify aspects or features of marriage as created, designed, and instituted by God.

Now, as I went through that process in preparation for today, I identified eight features or aspects of marriage in our passage that I want us to notice and consider. I think that together they provide a pretty good description of what marriage is as designed by God. But having said that, I don't make any claim that what I will say constitutes an exhaustive treatment of the subject, but would contend that the big truths are covered in this passage as we notice them and describe them.

[5 : 53] Now, for ease of recall or for note-taking for those who take notes, I think we can reduce each feature or aspect to a single word. So, given that there are eight features, there are eight words that we will, in turn, look at. Now, I want to, at this point, explain that we're going to do that on two occasions.

We're going to do it this morning, and we're also going to do it this evening. It would have been impossible to do justice to the passage in the time that we have for one sermon. So, if you want to get the whole picture, or at least as big a picture as I'm going to be able to give, then that will involve returning this evening. But there are eight words that we're going to be considering that appear in this foundational passage concerning marriage. And I'll say what they are, and then we can begin to look at them. The first word is companionship, companionship. The second word is one that we've already touched on with the children, and it's help, help. A following word is suitability. Now, that actual word isn't found in the passage, but we'll explain what we mean by that in a moment.

Companionship, help, suitability. Then another word I think that is at the heart of marriage is gratitude. I'll explain what I mean by that in a moment. Then we have authority, loyalty, union, and trust.

Eight words, and we intend to consider the first four this morning and four this evening to maintain pleasing symmetry. So, let's think then of these first four words in our list of words that together, I think, present a pretty good picture of what marriage is as determined and designed by God, our Creator. First of all, companionship. Notice in verse 18, Genesis chapter 2 and verse 18, we read, The Lord God said, It is not good for the man to be alone. It is not good for the man to be alone.

A tough question to ask of the first three chapters of Genesis, foundational chapters in so many ways, a tough question to ask of these chapters would be, what is the most astonishing or startling or remarkable statement found in these chapters? I say it's a difficult question because there are so many possible answers to that question. But I would like to suggest that the words of God recorded in verse 18 of chapter 2 certainly constitute a candidate for the most astonishing statement found in these opening chapters of the Bible. Why so? Well, I say that they are astonishing words because they stand in such stark contrast to what we have in the first chapter and the sevenfold refrain of God that punctuates His creative activity. And what are these words? Well, they are these, and God saw that it was good. We haven't read the whole of chapter 1, but those who are familiar with that chapter will know what I'm talking about. Throughout that chapter, the chapter is punctuated in this very deliberate way that as God is engaged in His creative activity, His activity is punctuated by this refrain, and God saw that it was good. But with that in mind, what are the words and the lips of God to describe one aspect of Adam in his perfect and pristine, unfallen state? Well, they are these words.

[9 : 50] Remarkable words. It is not good. It is not good. Something was not good in Eden. Now, that is remarkable. This is before the fall. This is before Adam and Eve had rebelled against God, and yet God looks at what is before Him, and He declares, it is not good. Something is not good. What was it? What was it that was not good? Well, Adam's solitude. Adam was alone, and that was not good. Now, here it is important to be clear. This was no failing on the part of God. This was not some design fault in God's creation, and suddenly He realized, oh, I've messed up here. I'm going to have to sort this out. That's not what we have going on. It is, if you wish, a question of timing. It was always God's intention to provide a companion for Adam. But while this had yet to be done, Adam's situation could be described and is described by God as not good. It is not good for the man to be alone. Now, it's an interesting question that we're not going to consider this morning, why it is that God chose to do things in the order that He did.

Why didn't He create Adam and Eve at exactly the same time? And I could give some thoughts on that, but we need to move on. It is as it is, and God does things as He chooses, as He has every right and prerogative to do so. But the obvious implication of God's own testimony concerning Adam in His solitary state, that it was not good, the obvious implication is that having a companion was considered by God to be both good and necessary. If it was not good for the man to be alone, then clearly it was good for the man to be accompanied. And marriage was the means determined by God to provide Adam with companionship. This is the manner in which God changes the circumstance from being not good to being good. Now, marriage, of course, course, and it's important to make this point, marriage is not the only source of companionship provided by God. We're not suggesting that for a moment. But what we are saying is that at the heart of marriage lies the need of men and women to enjoy companionship. And at this point, it's good for us to pause. And while what we are bringing or what we are saying this morning, I think is important for all of us, regardless of our own condition, whether we're married or not married, there is, of course, an obvious application at a practical level for those of us who are married. And in this matter,

I would encourage those who are married, I would encourage you to ask this question of your marriage. Are you good companions? As husband and wife, do you endeavor to cultivate this central aspect of marriage as designed by God, that you would be companions one to another? And of course, very much related to the theme of companionship is the matter of friendship. I'm not suggesting they're necessarily synonymous words, but there clearly is a connection and an overlap. And so, that's a question for us to ask, those of us who are married. Do we cultivate friendship as husband and wife? Is companionship, is friendship a central and enjoyed and appreciated aspect of your marriage? That is what God would have for you. This is how God has designed marriage, that you would enjoy companionship and friendship one with another. Now, while we'll not dwell on the matter, it would be wrong to move on without recognizing that while companionship, or the companionship provided by marriage constitutes God's norm, I think we can use that language. The Bible is very clear that the single state is both honorable and fulfilling for those so called by God. I think it's actually been quite interesting, even in this week when there's been so much talk of marriage. And regardless of where people stand on the spectrum, there seems to be this need to celebrate marriage. Everybody's in favor of marriage. Marriage is a wonderful thing, and so we want to extend it as much as possible. And I do wonder, in this orgy of self-congratulation about how wonderful marriage is, that is a danger of suggesting that those who are not married are somehow second-class citizens. That certainly is not the view of the Bible. As I say, time doesn't allow us to develop this this morning.

But in the Bible, and very particularly in the New Testament, it is very clear teaching that presents the single state as one that is honorable and fulfilling for those whom God calls to that. The whole question of being called to that is another difficult matter that we are not going to touch on this morning. But I didn't want to move on from this matter of companionship without making clear this point. That's the first word then, companionship. It is not good for the man to be alone. Marriage is about companionship. Companionship, friendship, is at the heart of, is central to God's design of marriage.

What about the second word? Well, the second word I mentioned is the word help. Again, in verse 18, as we continue the reading of that verse, it is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper.

[16 : 23] I will make a helper suitable for him. Now, the need for a helper highlights at least two important truths.

The first, in a way, is a very obvious one, but that does require highlighting. The first truth is that we need help. We are not able alone to do all that we are called to do. We all have our limitations.

That is not a weakness. That is a reality. That is the reality of men and women as created by God. We have our limitations. We are reading of circumstances before the fall, and yet God recognizes that Adam needed a helper. Adam was not able to do all that God called him to do alone. He could not.

He was not created in a manner that allowed him to do everything alone. He needed a helper, and that is true of us. We need help. In marriage, God provides a man with a helper, and indeed, I think we can reasonably by extension say that he provides a woman also with a helper.

Now, it is very important when we are talking about this word help or helper to understand what this word means and implies. The word helper, the word used, the Hebrew word used here translated helper in Genesis chapter 2 refers to function rather than to carrying any notion of status. Now, why do I say that, or what do I mean by that? What is very important to understand is that the helper is, not surprisingly, one who helps. That is all that is implied by the word. A helper is one who helps.

[18 : 23] There is no suggestion in the word that a helper implies either superiority or inferiority. You can understand how this could be misunderstood. Somebody might read this and say, oh, a helper.

Well, the helper must be somebody who has more capacity, more power, and so the helper is above the one helped. That would be one error that we could make. Of course, the other side of the coin, perhaps the more likely error to make, is to imagine that the helper is somehow inferior. The one helped is the important one, and the helper, well, they're just a helper. It's important to stress that the word does not in any way carry any notion of status. It is a word that describes function, the function of helping another. And what God says is that Adam needs a helper. He needs help. He can't do what he needs to do by himself. He needs help. In the event that it were thought that the idea of being a helper was in some way an inferior position to the one helped, I think the mistake can be made in both directions, but I think that is a more tempting mistake, to think that the helper is less than the one helped.

If that were even being considered, it is thrown out of court altogether. When we notice that in the Bible, very significantly, the very same word is used of God in relation to us. God is described as our helper. Now, if we understand that, I think we are able to dismiss out of court any suggestion that to be a helper is somehow an inferior position to the one helped. There are many occasions in the Bible where God is described in this way. For reasons of time, we will limit ourselves to one, I think, for many of us, familiar occasion in the Psalms, in Psalm 33, and in verse 20, we read, we wait in hope for the Lord. He is our help and our shield. He is our help. He is our helper. God describes Himself as our helper. So, in marriage, a central element as designed by God is that we help each other. We need help, and marriage provides the help that we need. Now, I think I've already suggested this, but it seems entirely reasonable to draw from Adam's need for a helper the conclusion that Eve would also require a helper. The idea is of marriage providing mutual help to those who need help.

Now, let's draw some of the practical implications of that for ourselves, those of us who are married in particular, I say to the husbands present this morning, and indeed to the wives, are you a good helper?

Are you a good helper? You know, sometimes in the language that we use in the context of our families, we sometimes describe our children as mommy's special helper or daddy's little helper, and that's, of course, entirely legitimate to speak in that way. But let me ask this question. Let me ask this question of the husbands here this morning. Are you mommy's biggest helper? And of the wives, are you daddy's biggest helper? That is, as God has designed marriage, that we could help one another. But the other implication of what God declares here, that Adam needed a helper. The first implication is that we need help. We all need help. But the second one, and it's very connected, is that we are given work to do. This follows on logically from the recognition that we need help, because the obvious subsequent question is, help to do what? You know, why did Adam need help?

[22 : 36] What was it that Adam needed to do that he needed help in order to do it? Well, Adam had a great deal to do. God gave Adam a great deal of work to do. In fact, such was the work that he was given that he could not do it alone. He needed help. What was that work? Well, we read in chapter 1 and in verse 28, God blessed them and said to them, Be fruitful and increase in number. Fill the earth and subdue it.

Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground. There is a twofold duty given to Adam. Indeed, Adam and Eve. First of all, they are to be fruitful and increase in number. This was a task that they were given. This was a ministry, if you wish, that they had to fulfill, but they also had to rule over and subdue the earth. It was sometimes known as the cultural mandate. This is the work that needed to be done. And what God determines is that Adam will be able to do that work. Indeed, Eve will be able to do that work better in a more fitting way together.

God gives us work to do in our service of Him, and He has determined that we are able to do that in a better way together. Now, as I say that, I would remind you of what I've already said. I'm not going to repeat myself, but simply remind you of what I've said concerning the single state and how that also provides a worthy opportunity, as worthy to serve God.

Of the task that Adam is given, the duty to be fruitful and increase in number is a duty that very evidently Adam could not fulfill alone. That is blindingly obvious. He needed help if he was to be fruitful and to increase in number. And of course, that does highlight one central purpose of marriage.

Not the only purpose of marriage, but a central purpose of marriage, to have and to raise children. And to remove that from a definition of marriage is to do violence to the institution as designed by God. Of course, it's the case that not all married couples are able to have children, and that is a very sad circumstance for many, and we recognize that. But to recognize that fact in no way detracts from the having and raising of children as being central to marriage as designed by God.

[25 : 26] Of course, that is not, as I say, the only purpose fundamental to the purpose of marriage as designed by God is to serve God in whatever way He determines for us. And marriage is intended to provide each other, husband and wife, the help we need to serve God as we ought. And there, too, there's an opportunity for self-examination for those of us who are married. Is that true of your marriage? Do you help each other serve God better? There's a third word that I want us to think about this morning, and the third word is suitability. We remain in verse 18 of our passage, the Lord God said, it is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him. A helper suitable for him. God is saying that it's not just any helper that will do for Adam. And this is a key word, the word translated suitable, it's a key word that takes us to the heart of what marriage is as designed by God. The picture that is painted in verses 19 and 20, the description of the events is, I think, almost amusing. I don't think it's inappropriate to call it almost amusing. There in verses 19 and 20, we have described all the animals being brought to Adam. Of course, the reason for that, or one of the reasons, was that he would name all the animals.

But also, it was an opportunity for Adam to see if among the animals there might be a suitable helper. Now, clearly, the intention of God was that at the end, Adam would realize that there wasn't, it wasn't ever being seriously contemplated, that there would be a suitable helper among the animals.

But even going through the process would help Adam, indeed help him to appreciate Eve so much more, in the light of having established that among the animals, a suitable helper would not be found.

Now, of course, it's not the case that the animals could be of no help to Adam. The issue is that no animal could be a suitable helper. What Adam needed was not only a helper, but a suitable helper. Now, I've said that this word is a very important one and critical to this matter, and in that regard, we are indebted, of course, as we often are, indeed always are. We're indebted to those scholars who help us to understand the meaning of these words. And in the case of this word translated suitable, we are told that the literal meaning of the word is along the lines of like opposite him. I will make a helper like opposite him. Now, that sounds a bit strange. Perhaps a way of understanding it better is, I will make a helper matching him. That is the idea that is in the word here.

The idea is that Eve was to be like Adam, but not the same as Adam. Yes, like him, but not the same. Perhaps the best language that we can use to get across the idea is that Eve was to complement Adam, and by necessary consequence, of course, Adam would complement Eve. Marriage then involves the coming together of two people who are to complement each other. In the case of Adam, God made Eve in such a way and with the precise purpose that she would complement Adam. And it is in this aspect of marriage that we discover that marriage of necessity involves the union of a man and a woman. Men and women are designed by God are designed by God to complement each other. God did not create another Adam. He could have done so. He did not. Why? Because another Adam would not have complemented the first Adam. Another

[29 : 20] Adam would have been able to provide companionship, I'm sure. The other Adam would have been able in a measure to help Adam, but another Adam would not, could not have complemented Adam as intended by God.

Now, I want to be clear here. I'm not suggesting for a moment that two men or two women cannot in any way complement each other. And I'm certainly not claiming that every marriage between a man and a woman fulfills the divine intention of perfectly complementing each other. That is very evidently not the case. But what I am saying is that it is only in the union of a man and a woman that it is possible potentially to experience the complementarity that is intrinsic to marriage as designed by God.

Now, that can be illustrated in many ways, but one very obvious example or illustration of this is in the matter of sexual complementarity. To any reasonable person, it is evident that men and women match each other sexually. We are designed by God to fit sexually. Now, this is confirmed by the capacity of that sexual union to provide for the conception of new life. Now, there's no need to dwell on this, but it is the case that two men or two women do not complement each other sexually. That's not to say that any sexual activity is impossible between two men or two women. That evidently is not the case. But it is to affirm that men and women that men and women have been designed by God to complement each other. That two men or two women have not been designed by God to join sexually. And I leave it at that. But what about those of us who are married, those of us who God has given us this gift of marriage? I ask you, are you a suitable helper for your wife? Are you a suitable helper for your husband? That is what God intends. It takes us to the fourth word, the final word that we're going to think about this morning, and that is the word gratitude. And this word I'm drawing from the account as it's related to us in verses 22 and 23. It's one aspect of marriage that maybe is not so immediately obvious. You see, in these verses, in verses 22 and 23, the narrative presents God's creation and provision of Eve as the making and giving of a precious gift to Adam. It also presents us with Adam's poem of grateful praise at the receiving of such a precious gift.

Now, we need to largely pass over any discussion on the manner that God chose to create this special gift. Suffice it to say that there is no reason to question that God employed the means the passage describes Him as employing. He took one of the man's ribs, and He made a woman from the rib. Now, though that may be mocked and scoffed and dismissed by so many today, there's no reason for us to quibble that that is the manner God chose to make Eve. On the matter of how He chose to make Eve, while it's not canonical, there is perhaps insight in an old Hebrew adage on this matter. God chose to make Eve from the rib of a man. He did not take her from Adam's head that she should rule over him. He did not take her from his foot that he should trample upon her, but from her rib that she might protect his heart. Now, that isn't Scripture, but I think there's some wisdom and discernment in it. Eve was created by God as a gift from the Heavenly Father to His beloved son, Adam. And Adam is profoundly grateful. I think we can detect that excitement, that grateful excitement of Adam as Eve is brought to Him. There in verse 22 we read, the Lord God made a woman from the rib. He had taken out of the man, and He brought her to the man. He brought her to the man. Here, the Heavenly Father brings this beautiful, precious gift and presents this gift to Adam. And Adam's response is beautiful. The man said, This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called woman, for she was taken out of man. There is an excitement, there is a rejoicing, there is a gratitude in Adam as he is presented with this picture of beauty before him, a suitable helper, a suitable helper that he so needed, a companion, a friend, a helper provided by God for Adam. Adam receives the gift, and he receives the gift gratefully.

For us today, those of us who are married, our wife, our husband, is God's gift to us. And the question needs to be asked, Are you grateful? Are you profoundly grateful for the gift that God has given you? But I think we can extend the application and say that marriage itself is a gift of God to us, as men and women. In the account that we have before us, the focus, for obvious reasons, is on the gift of Eve to Adam. But as I say, I think we can legitimately draw from that, that the institution itself, marriage itself, is a gift of God to us, His creatures, and as men and women particularly. Indeed, the entire scene in our passage conveys the message that God is the one who is establishing the institution of marriage. Now, again, that is something that is quickly dismissed today. But we who believe the Bible to be the Word of God, and we recognize all do not hold that conviction, so be it. But we who do, do state unequivocally and unapologetically, that marriage is an institution created by God. It is a gift that God has given to us. And so I ask the question at that level, not only at our own individual level, being grateful for the wife God has given us or the husband God has given us, but are we grateful for the precious gift of marriage itself? When you are given a precious gift in life generally, what you must never do, and I think we'd all agree that this would not be appropriate, is to find fault in the gift received. If we're given something lovingly, if what we are given is precious and valuable, it's not fitting to be quibbling with it or finding fault in it. A gift is to be received as given. What we are doing as a nation, or are in the process of doing as a nation, is seeking to improve on marriage, to improve on marriage as designed by God. To attempt to do that is not only foolish, though it certainly is foolish, it's also ungrateful. So, marriage is designed by God in this foundational passage has these elements that we thought about this morning. Companionship, help, suitability, and gratitude. Well, four down, four to go, to be continued. Let us pray.

[37 : 34] Thank you. Thank you.