

The drama of marriage: from Eden to Aberdeen

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[0 : 00] When I got engaged, a friend took me aside and in a serious tone indicated that he had words of counsel on the subject that he wanted to share.

Now I've told this story a few times so you may have heard this, but he forewarned me in the following terms. The first two years are difficult, but after that it's impossible.

Well, that may be true, it may not be true, and we may smile, but the Pharisees who tested Jesus appear to have been of a similar opinion.

Indeed, never mind the Pharisees, the good citizens of Team GB, that would be all of us, we seem to be falling out of love with marriage. The statistics, as I understand them, indicate that over 40% of marriages end up in divorce.

Why does Jesus deal with the matter of marriage on this occasion? Let's just comment on that detail. Why on this occasion does Jesus touch on this subject?

[1 : 16] Well, the simple answer is that he has posed a question, and he responds to the question. But it's also, I think, significant that as Jesus begins his final journey to Jerusalem, and here we meet Jesus as he has begun that journey from Galilee to Jerusalem for the final time, that as he begins that journey, he broaches three key issues in life and Christian discipleship.

The issue of marriage that we'll be looking at this morning, he then goes on to speak of children, and then goes on to speak of possessions, and obviously that's related to employment and possessions.

And when you think of it, that covers pretty much a fair chunk of what life is and involves for us. And so there does seem to be this deliberate intent, perhaps even in the ordering of the material, to present what Jesus has to say on these three key life issues.

Now, the manner in which we're going to deal with the material before us this morning is maybe a little unusual. We'll see how it works, but we're going to try and recreate the drama of marriage in history, or in any case, in the biblical revelation that we have of how it has developed.

And we'll find that, at least in a measure, in the verses that we have before us. And I think if we are going to look at it in that way, we can divide the drama into four acts that follow chronologically.

[3 : 02] The first act in this drama, not surprisingly, is Eden, the very beginning, the first act, where we are given God's instruction concerning this institution, the institution of marriage.

But then we can move on to Act 2. And Act 2 involves a period of time that begins at Eden, but then culminates in a certain degree in the wilderness.

And I'm thinking particularly of what Moses has to say on the matter in the verses that we read there in Deuteronomy. That's where Moses was with God's people in the wilderness. And there is a reference there to marriage, and it reveals.

The verses there aren't intended to give some summary of what's happened, but they do, by implication, reveal what has happened in the course of those years that have passed, those hundreds of years that have passed.

So that's Act 2, from Eden through to the wilderness. But then Act 3 is the passage before us on the banks of the Jordan.

[4 : 12] We read there of how they crossed the Jordan. Now, we don't know if they were on the banks or not, but in order to give it a location, that's the way we're describing it. Act 3, what is revealed by this dialogue, this hostile dialogue, really, between the Pharisees and Jesus.

And then the final act, Act 4, we're describing as back to Eden. And indeed, if we wanted a location for this final act, it could be here today in Aberdeen for us as disciples of Jesus Christ.

So that's the way in which we're going to try and develop the material before us by going on this journey, as it were, as marriage is developed through time, be it for good or for ill.

First of all, then, Act 1 in Eden. Now, the discussion about the subject begins with a question posed by the Pharisees. We read there in verse 2, Now, it's very clear that Jesus knew that the question that they posed was grounded in the smug assurance that the liberal view, if we can call it that, that they held was validated by no less an authority than Moses, or so they thought.

And so they were comfortable that whatever answer Jesus gave, they'd be able to turn and say, Ah, but what about Moses? What did Moses say? Of course, Jesus knows that that's where they're coming from.

[5 : 54] And knowing that that's where they're coming from, Jesus effectively responds by saying to them, You want Moses? Well, I'll give you Moses. I'll give you Moses.

And we're not going to go to Deuteronomy. We're going to go right back to Genesis. We're going to go right back to the beginning. You want Moses? Okay, let's do Moses. And so Jesus goes to the first book of the Pentateuch to deal with what God had to say as He did so through Moses recording that material there at the very beginning.

And so He deals with and presents in few words marriage belonging to a pristine creation of which God could say with profound satisfaction that it was very good.

And of course, that included the institution of marriage. Well, what are those original elements of marriage that Jesus highlights with reference to Genesis?

Well, we can look at the very words that He quotes from Genesis to see these original elements. First of all, there in verse 5 or verse 6 rather, we read, but at the beginning of creation, God made them male and female.

[7 : 20] So first of all, Jesus goes to Genesis chapter 1 and verse 27, where God indicates or where it is recorded for us the manner in which God created human beings.

He made them male and female. So this is the first fundamental truth that Jesus points the Pharisees to as He will then go on to develop the matter of marriage.

And it seems such a basic truth, and yet in this mixed-up, confused world in which we live, this is actually a fundamental truth that we need to cling on to and defend.

Who would have thought that we would need to defend something as basic as this? God made them male and female. But of course, we do need to defend this truth. We live in a confusing and confused world, no more so in the bizarre appearance and development of gender politics.

Some of you may have heard in the news not that long ago of a survey produced by the government-sponsored children's commissioner for England, in which teenagers in Brighton, as it happens, were asked, how do you define your gender?

[8 : 31] And then this survey booklet gave 25 options, 25 no less, including gender fluid, agender, gender queer, and in the middle of boy and girl.

Just to quote a few of the possibilities that the teenagers could choose from as they self-identified their gender. Coming closer to home, you'll have heard not that long ago of how the Scottish government, our government, is toying with the idea of allowing children, with the agreement of their parents, to self-declare their gender identity, be that male or female or something in between.

This is nothing short of bizarre, and let's not be bullied into imagining there is anything that is valid or worthwhile in this bizarre and ridiculous development that we're seeing around us.

The pressure to conform is great, but we must stand firm on this basic fundamental truth that is established at the very beginning, and that Jesus highlights here, interestingly in connection with what he will go on to say about marriage.

It has to do with marriage. In the beginning, God made them male and female. Now, the matters that we just touched on in the passing, and we can't spend more time developing, go beyond marriage, but they strike at the very foundation of marriage as designed by God, namely this reality, this truth, that God made them male and female.

[10 : 10] But Jesus goes on to make reference to another verse at the very beginning of Genesis, this time in chapter 2 and verse 24, where you have the very explicit teaching concerning marriage.

There we notice what Jesus quotes in verse 7. For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.

So they are no longer two, but one. And in these words, familiar words from Genesis chapter 2, we discover the key building blocks of marriage.

They're present even in these few words. Marriage as being an institution that is made up of one man and one woman, an institution where one man and one woman are united to the exclusion of others, and an institution that is to be permanent or lifelong.

These basic truths concerning marriage are found even in these few words from Genesis chapter 2 that Jesus brings to the attention of the Pharisees.

[11 : 18] They're so keen on Moses, and he says, well, fine, let's see what Moses says, or let's see what God says in the first book of Moses there in Genesis. And then, of course, there comes the inevitable conclusion of this act 1 in Eden, what God has joined together, let man not separate.

So that's act 1 in the beginning. At the beginning it was so. But we have to move on, and we have to move on to what we're calling act 2, which takes us from Eden to the wilderness, to the occasion where Moses gives what seems to us somewhat confusing instructions about this issuing of a certificate of divorce.

In verses 3 and 4 of our passage, we have Jesus posing a question that is answered by the Pharisees on the grounds of instruction concerning marriage given by Moses and recorded there in Deuteronomy chapter 4, the four verses that we read.

This is legislation that was given while the people were still in the wilderness and about to enter the promised land. But it's still very much at the early stages of the people as the people of God, having gone through the wilderness and about to enter the promised land.

And the Pharisees refer to this legislation. And Jesus explains, when they point him in that direction, Jesus explains that this legislation was given because their hearts were hard.

[13 : 01] Notice there in verse 5, when he's responding to this issue of a certificate of divorce as being an option for husbands. Notice it's very much the husbands who have this option in the mindset, in the view of the Pharisees.

Jesus responds by saying, yes, that's true. Moses did say that. But the reason he said it, the reason he gave these instructions was because your hearts were hard.

And our concern as we follow the drama is to identify the progression or downward spiral of marriage that this legislation responds to. The legislation isn't what establishes the new situation.

The legislation is responding to what has happened over time. Things are not as they were intended. Things are not as they were at the beginning. And so there is this response to this new situation, if you wish.

And in considering this progression, we can do so by making two points concerning hard hearts. This is at the heart of this. Jesus himself says the reason Moses said this is because of your hard hearts.

[14 : 12] So let's notice two things about hard hearts that explain this downward spiral, if you wish. First of all, what hard hearts do.

What do hard hearts do? Well, they spoil and they exploit. Hard, sinful, selfish hearts spoil marriage. Hard hearts make marriage, at the heart of God's perfect creation, tedious and tortuous.

And sometimes both of these things together and any manner of other evils in between. Hence the seeming need and clamor for divorce.

Why is it that it was even an issue to regulate the practice of divorce? Because hard hearts had spoiled marriage. And so there is this response, this legislative response, if you wish, recorded for us there in Deuteronomy.

This legislation, that we're not going to spend time considering the details of this morning, but this legislation is evidence that marriage had been spoiled.

[15 : 24] But hard hearts don't only spoil, hard hearts also exploit. It's very clear from the reading in Deuteronomy, and indeed from the dialogue in Mark's Gospel, it's very clear that husbands have the upper hand and are using that power to exploit and oppress their wives.

And so hard hearts spoil marriage, hard hearts exploit within a marriage. That's what hard hearts do, but the second thing we want to comment on concerning hard hearts is that what hard hearts require.

And what is required, and what explained the verses we've read in Deuteronomy, what is required is, we might call it damage limitation. This is what the legislation in Deuteronomy is all about.

Moses is not saying, and of course God is not saying, though these words, this legislation, wasn't Moses' bright idea. This is God's law pronounced and provided through Moses.

But what is not being said by this legislation, it's not being said that divorce is good or even justified. simply there is a response to a bad situation with measures that will limit the damage and crucially and importantly provide a measure of protection for women from the exploitation that they are suffering.

[17 : 04] The certificate of divorce, if we just focus in on that one matter, the certificate of divorce referred to would allow a woman badly treated in this way to remarry and so secure sustenance for herself and her children that otherwise perhaps would have been impossible.

Moses was, and we can't wriggle out of this by saying, oh, this was just Moses' idea. No, Moses was legislating as directed by God. And what this reveals is what is sometimes called the principle of accommodation.

What do we mean by that? Or what is meant by that terminology? Well, what's meant by that is, as applied to this matter, is that God is not changing marriage. God is not watering down the original instructions.

But God is graciously accommodating Himself to the ravages caused by human sin or hard hearts, to use the language that Jesus uses.

That is what is going on, and that is what explains the verses that we've read in Deuteronomy, even if we don't go into the details of what was being contemplated or the scenario that was being presented in these verses.

[18 : 23] Well, that's Act 2. What began as something perfect in Eden has suffered from this downward spiral, evidenced by the need for the legislation that we've read.

But that takes us to Act 3. And Act 3 of this drama is on the banks of the Jordan. Here, the encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees.

The reference regarding this act is to first-century Palestine, this testing dialogue between the Pharisees and Jesus. Things have moved on.

Hundreds of years, of course, have passed since Moses gave the instructions that we read. But things have moved on. The legislation in Deuteronomy was intended to deal with an exception, the tragic consequence of hard hearts.

But we can detect that two things have happened in the intervening centuries. So you've got Eden in the beginning. Things move on. There's this downward spiral.

[19 : 31] This exception is recognized and legislated for. But centuries have passed and things have gone from bad to worse. And we can notice two things that have happened.

The first thing that we notice is that the exception has become the rule. Now, we know that that's never a wise thing to do in so many areas of life. But that's what's happened. The exception established, or at least recognized by Moses, has now become the rule.

What the Pharisees say in verse 2 makes this, sorry, in verse 4, makes this abundantly clear. They say, Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.

Notice that they make no reference to the very specific circumstances in which this was possible. No, they say, no. Moses said it's okay. Moses said it's okay to get a divorce. Moses said it's okay to send your wife away.

What do you say? The exception has now become the rule. Maybe we can try and illustrate this a little. I have little idea of what is involved in learning to fly.

[20 : 38] But I imagine that somewhere in the process, you need to learn what is involved in securing a safe crash landing. But imagine if a learner pilot decided that all he needed to learn was how to crash land a plane.

How bizarre and foolish would that be? But this is what had happened with marriage. The teaching, the legislation of Deuteronomy 24 was intended to deal with the occasional and tragic exception.

It was about damage limitation and crash landing a marriage with the least number of casualties possible. But it had become the norm.

Abusing of God's gracious accommodation to limit the pain, the Pharisees, and of course not just the Pharisees, had converted this legislation into the central plank of a new of marriage that justified and facilitated divorce.

The exception has become the rule. But there's also more that we can say. And the second thing we can say is that the new rule, which never should have been a rule, but the new rule is abused.

[21 : 56] Over time, things got worse. It was not just that the Deuteronomy passage was used to justify divorce in extreme circumstances, but that it was then interpreted or twisted to justify divorce or the power to secure a divorce for men in almost any circumstance.

In the passage there in Deuteronomy in verse 1, a clear reference is made to sexual immorality as being the cause or justification, if you wish, for issuing a certificate of divorce.

The actual language is something indecent. If the husband is displeased with something indecent, that term something indecent is referring to sexual immorality.

But over time, that verse, what Moses taught or what Moses regulated on, was creatively broadened. One way of doing this was separating the word, that which is displeasing, from the obvious original cause of displeasure, something indecent.

And so the debate that raged in first century Palestine between the different schools of Judaism was between the hardliners who, to their credit, said, no, the only cause is something indecent, sexual immorality, to those taking a more liberal view and said, no, there's the word displeasure in there.

[23 : 26] So anything displeasing to the husband can be a justification for divorce. So if she doesn't prepare the food properly, that's a good reason.

I'm not making this up. There were rabbis who argued that case. The husband was displeased. Ah, Moses spoke about being displeased. We can divorce. We can issue the certificate.

Or indeed, it was twisted to such a way when the word displeasure was said, ah, yes, well, if it's about displeasure, what if a husband is not displeased necessarily, but more pleased with somebody else?

Ah, that's okay as well. You know, he's displeased with his wife because somebody else is more attractive. And so he can issue a certificate of divorce. So not only had the exception become the rule, but the rule itself is abused and twisted to the convenience of husbands, of men who hold the power.

This is what is happening. Indeed, that reality of that debate and of that argument is captured more clearly in Matthew's account of the dialogue that we're looking at.

[24 : 36] In Matthew chapter 19 and verse 3, we have the same question, but it's more fully recorded. In Matthew chapter 19 and verse 3, we read, some Pharisees came to Jesus to test him.

They asked, is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason? There's a debate that's behind that question. And the debate is between those who said, no, not for any reason, and those who said, yes, for any reason.

And so they're saying, well, what do you say, Jesus? But both sides of the debate had got it wrong, only some more so than others. That's Act 3.

That's where Jesus finds the situation concerning marriage. The downward spiral that had begun soon after Eden is evidenced by what Moses had to legislate on, and now things have gone from bad to worse.

The rule, or rather the exception, has become the rule, and even the rule has been abused by the people. But let's move to the final act.

[25 : 46] And the final act in this drama is what we're calling Eden Rediscovered. Jesus is less concerned with the Pharisees and more concerned with his disciples.

And given that this is so, he takes advantage of the opportunity provided by the discussion with the Pharisees to present a challenge to the disciples. This is Act 4 of the drama, and we are all actors.

All disciples are actors in this act of the drama. It is a challenge for today. It is the challenge that we're calling Eden Rediscovered.

Let's notice, and just briefly notice, three aspects of the challenge. First of all, the audience for the challenge. We've already really stated what it is, but we can substantiate that or ground that in the passage.

Notice, we're told in verse 10, when they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. This reference to the disciples and Jesus being in the house again shouldn't be understood, I don't think, as an incidental geographic reference.

[26 : 56] Well, that's where they happened to be. Rather, the house was the location for private instruction directed specifically to the disciples. The Pharisees aren't here.

This is instruction to the disciples that emerges from the discussion with the Pharisees. This is for their ears only.

It would be true for others, but it's directed particularly to them, and it is a word of challenge to them. And what Jesus says in these final verses of our section, they are words that follow from what He has stated about the beginning and the original intentions of God.

So the audience for these words, this final challenge, are, let's be clear, the disciples. The disciples had bought in to the popular conception of marriage, and they need to be, they need to understand that they can't simply go with the flow.

That also is confirmed from Matthew's account. In Matthew chapter 19, in verse 10, when Jesus has explained God's original intention, there we read, the disciples said to Him, if this is the situation between a husband and a wife, it is better not to marry.

[28 : 21] You see what's going on there? They're saying, wow, this is really difficult. If this is the way it is, wow, we're not, we don't, I don't even get married. You see, they bought in to what everybody thought. They bought in to this distorted view of marriage.

And Jesus now brings them together in private and says, right, you're my disciples. You can't just go with the flow. I have a challenge for you, and the challenge is to rediscover Eden, to rediscover marriage as originally intended.

So the disciples are the audience. What about the nature of the challenge? Well, we've just stated that. Get back to Eden. Disciples of Jesus are to rediscover and live by the original design for marriage as created by God.

And what Jesus says in these verses, in verses 11 and 12, needs to be understood as developing the practical implications of what he has highlighted concerning the original instructions in Eden.

The popular conception supported by the religious leaders was that it was okay to divorce and remarry. And that should be seen really as a package, divorce and remarry.

[29 : 35] Jesus says, no. Such a course of action, he explains in these final verses, such a course of action is contrary to God's design and results in sin, the sin of adultery.

Disciples are not to go with the flow. Disciples are to demonstrate God's perfect design in action. We live in a society where marriage is a topic for debate and discussion in the public square.

And we need to defend and argue for God's original design in the public square. But even more importantly, we need to model God's original design in our own communities and families and marriages.

This is a challenge that Jesus is laying to his disciples. Yes, that's what people say. That's what the religious leaders say. But you're my disciples. And if you're my disciples, you don't just go with the flow.

You go with what God has indicated. You follow God's instructions. And for that, you need to go back to Eden and listen to what God designed and God's original description of marriage.

[30 : 48] The audience for the challenge, the nature of the challenge, but then finally also what we could call the realism of the challenge. Now, in what Jesus says here as he addresses his disciples, his principal concern is not to identify, even less commend, the exceptions.

That said, Jesus is realistic. The principle of accommodation, evident in the legislation in Deuteronomy, still holds, is still necessary for a sin-sick world.

And this realism, if you want to call it that, is captured also in Matthew's account. Occasionally, we're turning to Matthew's account of this conversation to just bring in elements that Mark chooses not to record.

But in Matthew chapter 19, in verses 8 and 9, listen to what Jesus says, the parallel to what he says in verses 11 and 12 in Mark's account. Jesus replied, Matthew 19, verse 8, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard, but it was not this way from the beginning.

I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife except for marital unfaithfulness, that would be the New Testament equivalent to something indecent in Deuteronomy, and marries another woman, commits adultery.

[32 : 08] Jesus is acknowledging that in this sin-sick world there are circumstances in which, though this goes contrary to God's original design, there are circumstances when damaged limitation allows for the possibility and the prospect of divorce.

And he gives an explicit reason there in Matthew. So there is a realism to the challenge. Of course, at the practical level, and this isn't the time or we certainly don't have the time to deal with this in the depth that it requires, but on the practical level, the question could be asked, well, is this the only exception, marital unfaithfulness?

Well, I think we can say that it's the only exception with explicit biblical support. But a case has been made in time within the church for desertion or abandonment as a further exception to the no-divorce rule.

That's certainly the position adopted in our confession of faith. The Westminster Confession of Faith has a chapter on marriage where it endeavors to present the biblical material. And it says this in relation to the exceptions to the rule.

And I'll simply read what it says. Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments unduly to put asunder those whom God has joined together in marriage, recognizing that people look for excuses beyond those that are legitimate, yet nothing but adultery or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the church or civil magistrate is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage.

[33 : 54] Of course, even there, even if you are of a mind to consider that to be a legitimate understanding of the biblical material, even there, there's a question of definition.

How do we define desertion? What constitutes desertion? There are occasions where, in the interest of compassion, it may be legitimate to recognize desertion, even where the parties are not physically separate.

Certainly a case could be made for that. Now, these clearly are not easy matters. But we need to strive to balance the rigorous and ultimately gracious demands of God's Word with the realities recognized by God Himself of a sin-sick world in which we live.

Marriage is a beautiful thing. God only creates beautiful things. And the challenge for us as disciples of Jesus Christ is to rediscover Eden.

We are actors in Act 4 of the drama of marriage. And may God help us so to live as to commend the beauty of God's design to those who know only that which has been spoiled and exploited by the hard hearts of men and women.

[35 : 17] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank You that You are a God who gives good gifts to us. We acknowledge the good gift of family and marriage.

We also recognize and confess that we are so prone to spoil that which is good. We are so prone to exploit those who are weaker within an institution that is good.

And we confess that to be so. We confess it as a race. We confess it as a people. We confess it as a nation. But we also confess it each of us as individuals.

Those of us who are married, we fall short. We don't live up to the ideal. We confess this to be so and ask that You would forgive us.

We thank You for this challenge that Jesus lays before us as His disciples that we might rediscover Eden, that we might rediscover God's original design and that by Your help and strengthening and enabling might so live our lives and model our homes and marriages in a way that would proclaim to others what a good and perfect gift it is.

[36 : 34] In these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.