

# *Making Love Bloom Again – Part 3*

## **Prioritizing Your Marriage**

**Ephesians 5:21-33**

**May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2006**

Once upon a time a small Jewish village was deciding where to build their place of worship. According to this story, here's how they decided: two brothers worked as farmers and every night they divided their grain in half and went to their homes. One brother was single and the other brother was married with a large family. The single brother decided that his married brother needed more grain to feed his family, so late at night he snuck into his brother's yard and poured the extra grain into his brother's grain bin. But the married brother felt sorry for his single brother who had no one to care for him in his old age. So the married brother also arose each night, sneaking into his brother's yard and giving him an extra portion of the grain. One night, in the deep darkness, they bumped into each other with their sack of grain. When the brothers realized where their extra grain was coming from, they embraced and wept for joy. And as God saw what happened, He said, "This is the holy place – a place of love – and that is where my temple shall be built." So that holy place became the place where God was made known to His people.<sup>1</sup>

Over the past three weeks we've been looking at Ephesians chapter 5 and this morning we discover a startling truth about marriage: in and through Christ a husband and wife become a "holy place," a place that displays God's love and makes his ways known throughout the earth. Let's just pause here for a minute because this is truly amazing – the Apostle Paul calls it a "profound mystery" (see verse 32). For those who are trusting in Christ, marriage is more than companionship, mutual comfort, and having children; it's a living drama and an ongoing story of God's deep love for his people. That raises my marriage to a whole new level, spurring me to pursue my wife with a passionate intensity.

We need to start here because we live in a culture that often makes marriage look pretty ugly. Over 90% of Americans rate "having a happy marriage" as one of their life goals, but according to one contemporary author, "for a significant percentage of the population ... (marriage) itself isn't living up to its vows."<sup>2</sup> So most people in our culture enter marriage with what we could call an "ethic of expressive individualism." It's about me, or at best, it's about you and me and how I feel about you and me. The book and movie called *The Bridges of Madison County* is a good example of this. After a three-day passionate affair, Robert tells Francesca, the wife of a passionless Iowa farmer, "My whole life has brought me here to you ... Do you think love like this happens to everyone? Don't throw us away ... Come away with me." You see, the relationship isn't any bigger than the individuals. It's just me or just me and you. Unfortunately, many Christian marriages aren't any better or bigger. But for a follower of Christ, marriage has

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Thomas, **Sacred Marriage**, pages 30-31.

<sup>2</sup> Laura Kipnis, **Against Love, A Polemic**, quoted in "Marriage in Western Culture," by Mardi Keyes, Critique #8 – 2004, page 8.

a breathtaking vision and challenge and adventure: the story of your love for each other can display a greater story – the story of God’s love and glory and redemptive power.

So my marriage is a living parable, the holy place where people find God. We already saw this implied earlier in this passage. For instance, verses 25-27 compare how a husband is called to love his wife like Jesus himself loved the church. In verse 29 we read that Jesus still nurtures and nourishes his church. Now in verse 31 Paul begins to make this thought clear and explicit: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” It’s a direct quote from Genesis 2:24 and it contains what one scholar calls “the most profound and fundamental statement in the whole (Bible) concerning God’s plan for marriage.” The word “united” literally means to “be glued” or “to be clumped together.” If you’re married this morning, your marriage takes precedence over your relationship with your parents, your family of origin, and even your children. So, wives, for the sake of your children, put your husband first. And, husbands, for the sake of your children, put your wives first. Don’t center your life on your children; center your life on your spouse – you’ll have a happier marriage and you’ll also have secure and confident kids. This verse raises marriage to unfathomable heights, adorning it with beauty and dignity.

But notice how quickly the thought changes in this passage in verse 32 – “This is a profound mystery...” In the New Testament a mystery means something that’s so deep and wonderful that God had to explain it or we wouldn’t get it. So a mystery is part of God’s revelation to us. And this passage is describing not just any mystery but a “profound” mystery. It’s deep and staggering. So hold on. Sit down. Buckle yourself in because this is a heart-thumping, bigger-than-Six-Flags, wild ride of mystery. What is the profound mystery? Well, it’s the dignity and beauty and potential of marriage as God designed it. It’s the mystery of one flesh, how through the embrace of sexual intercourse, a husband and wife become one. Notice that the Bible stands back and says, “Wow, sex in marriage – cool! Awesome!” But hold on, Paul says, because the *real* mystery is this (see verse 32): “I’m talking about Christ and the church.” So the beauty and dignity of marriage, as good as it is, begins to fade into the background. The primary focus is on another, greater mystery: how Jesus Christ woos and wins and loves and romances and sticks with the church. Again, if you’re a follower of Christ, your marriage has a grand vision, a compelling calling and a huge mission. Your marriage points beyond itself. It points to Christ’s love for the church, that holy place where people find God.

At this point, some of you may be saying, “Well, that stinks. We’re a long way from being a ‘holy place.’ Our marriage is an unholy swamp of conflict, hurt and pain.” Or perhaps you’re saying, “Now I’m really hopeless because my marriage failed.” Every marriage, like very person on this planet, is imperfect and sinful. But remember what this portion of Scripture is saying: marriage always points to something bigger. It points to the best, deepest, most wonderful love story in the universe: God’s love for us. So this verse tells us: get your eyes off your marriage for a minute. Get your eyes off your parents’ marriage, which perhaps was a disaster and it left you wounded and reeling. Instead, focus on the real marriage – Christ’s love for his people.

What does that mean? From start to finish the Bible contains a giant thread, a major theme that compares God's love for us to a marriage. The Bible is a love story, revealing God's heart for the human race. God's ultimate goal isn't just to get us to believe certain intellectual facts or perform religious duties. The overriding theme in the Bible is that God wants to win our hearts. In that sense, our relationship with God isn't just like a shepherd with sheep, or a master and his slaves, or even a parent and children. It is all of that, but it's even more: God wants us to love Him like a bride loves the bridegroom.

Let me give you a few specific examples from the Bible:

1. Hosea 2:16, 19a → "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." God defines our relationship and God claims that it will be like a marriage. How do you view God – more like a spouse or more like a boss? According to God's own word, God wants to have the intimacy of a marriage relationship, not the formality of a working relationship.
2. Isaiah 62:5 → The prophet Isaiah also 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). I know people that sit in church Sunday after Sunday, serving diligently in church, but they have no daily experience that God likes them. In Christ this prediction from Isaiah has been fulfilled: when you trust in Christ you are reconciled to God the Father. And your relationship changes. God rejoices over you. I've been able to stand right by the groom for about 100 weddings. And it's the same way every time: the bride enters the room in all her glory, the music shifts, everyone turns and looks, the air is thick with anticipation, and the groom looks at me or he looks at his groomsmen and his eyes say, "Yeaaaa! This is it! There she is!" That is the way God feels about you. Notice I used the word *feels*. God doesn't just think about you; God feels about you in a certain way. If you're trusting in Christ this morning, then you can know that God sees you clothed in Christ and that God the Father rejoices over you!
3. Matthew 9:15 → Jesus compares himself to the bridegroom by asking a question: "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them?" In other words, whenever he's around, it's party time! How can you not celebrate when the bridegroom is right in front of you?
4. Jeremiah 2:1; 3:6, 8a → So if this is true, that God relates to us on the level of marital intimacy, and if God wants us to experience – right now – the joy of a wedding feast, and if God delights in us like a bridegroom over his bride, then what does it mean to walk away from God? What does it mean to ignore God, to flaunt God, to give our heart to another lover? There's only one way to describe our refusal to love and serve God: it's called adultery. Listen to God speak in the Book of Jeremiah: "I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert" (Jeremiah 2:1). But then they ditched God. They had an affair and God came home and found his bride in bed with another lover. "Have you seen faithless Israel?" God asks in the next chapter

(see 3:6). “She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there.”

You were made for relationship, and on the deepest level you were made for a relationship with God. So according to the Biblical story, God alone can bring deep satisfaction to our souls. God is glorified when we are satisfied in Him. And when we give our heart to anything less than God, it’s called adultery, it’s called sleeping around on God, and eventually it will lead to dissatisfaction and emptiness.

A few years ago a young woman came to see me for advice. (She was from another state so you don’t know her). On the surface everything in her life seemed in order: she was happily married to a nice guy – a successful salesman, she had wonderful children, she was involved in the church, she knew Jesus as Savior, but she had a problem: she was having an affair with an old flame from her college days. They became lovers, often meeting in a hotel room for their liaisons. She needed advice because she needed her husband but she didn’t want to leave her lover. “What should I do?” she said, “I can’t leave my husband but my lover makes me feel so alive – and my heart has been dead for years.”

What would you tell her? The traditional Christian answer might go like this: “You are sinning. Repent and deny your desires. Get yourself out of this mess and give your heart back to your husband.” Please understand me: that is all true, but it isn’t the right answer because it’s only partially true. Did you remember what she said – “My heart has been dead for years”? But she’s a faithful Christian and a dedicated church servant. What happened to her heart? As the song says, she was looking for love in all the wrong places. She wasn’t just cheating on her husband, she was cheating on God. For years, in her relationship with God, she pursued duty without delight. She served God as a boss but she had no idea that God wanted to rejoice over her like a bridegroom. God – not duty, not her husband or her lover – God alone, the Living God, the Fountain of Living Water, could make her heart come alive.

The love story of the Living God who rejoices over us is the profound mystery that Paul mentions in Ephesians 5:32. Christ has pursued us with a holy and passionate love. He “gave himself up” for us (5:25) so that he could wash us and cleanse us and make us beautiful (5:26-27). And even when we betray him, sleep around, commit spiritual adultery, God the Master Lover, continues to pursue us. In Christ all of God’s promises are yes (2 Corinthians 1:20). So this promise from Isaiah has been fulfilled: God delights over you. God rejoices over you. Do you know that today? Don’t tell me that you know it as an intellectual concept, for God wants you to know it with the passion of a Lover. Is God your boss or is God your bridegroom?

Now remember this is the big love story. Of course this passage from Ephesians 5 also weaves a small story – the story of each marriage that belongs to Christ. So the profound, the deeper mystery is about us and God; but what does this passage tell us about our marriages?

First, like God's love for us, every Christ-centered marriage involves covenant faithfulness. God sticks with his people. God does not give up on them. In verse 31 we're told that husbands and wives model their marriages after God's covenant faithfulness by cleaving or by remaining glued to one another. I love what Pastor Tim Keller says about this: "Whoever you marry, you'll eventually fall out of like with them. Emotions will come and go. But if marriage is treated like a covenant, it will last ... and when your heart is dry, you'll still invest in and love and cherish and serve and listen to them, which gets you through the dry times, and eventually eliminates the dry times."

In his novel *The First Circle*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn tells the story of a political prisoner named Nerzhyn who is married to Nadya. As time drags on for Nerzhyn, hopelessly trapped in the bowels of Communist injustice, both he and his wife have an opportunity for sexual fulfillment with other lovers. In her work at the university, Nadya is offered the warmth and comfort of a friend who would like to be her lover. As she rejects the offer, "She stood like someone crucified on the black cross of the window. There had been one tiny little spot of warmth in her life, and it was gone. And in a minute or two she had resigned herself to that loss. She was her husband's wife again." When Nerzhyn is offered a sexual tryst in prison, he tells his would-be lover about his wife: "I love only her ... She has killed her youth for my sake ... I must go back to her alone." As they die to the chance for sex and romance, they both experience the power of Christ's resurrection. Both are purified in love and hope and faith. They become saints.<sup>3</sup>

If my marriage is about me or even just us, this story doesn't make sense. But if the aim of my marriage is to proclaim and display God's love to the world, if the aim of my marriage is to become the holy place where people find God, if it's much bigger than my feelings and my needs, then this story makes perfect sense.

Secondly, every Christ-centered marriage also involves mission. Your marriage is bigger than you, but it's also much bigger than just you and your spouse. Did you notice how the Apostle Paul places this whole discussion on marriage in the context of the church? Yes, in your marriage you turn and face one another. You belong to one another alone. But a Christ-centered marriage also belongs to the community. So whether you're married or single, you belong to the body of Christ. You are now two individuals in pursuit of a common vision, a common quest, a common mission. So a mature marriage looks beyond itself, beyond our comfort, beyond our needs and faces the hurting world outside, offering the healing love of Christ.

When my friends Kevin and Karen Miller started to explore this idea that marriage involves mission, they counted 116 Christian books on marriage that dealt with topics like improving communication and enhancing your sex life, but they didn't find one book on how to serve Christ together as a couple. I love serving God *with* my wife. We haven't always enjoyed it. She approaches life very differently than I do, but I've learned to trust and honor the way my wife thinks about ministry. She's incredibly intuitive. She's also much more in tune with spiritual realities. I want to find creative ways to serve together.

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<sup>3</sup> Recounted in Maxine Hancock, **The Forever Principle**, Pages 100-101.

What is your marriage mission? As we'll see in a few weeks, singleness provides glorious opportunities that are unavailable to married couples. But marriage provides the same sense of opportunity. What can you do together that you could never do alone? Of course welcoming and raising children is an incredibly spiritual activity. But you can also practice radical hospitality. Open your homes to the stranger, to the hungry, to the spiritually seekers. Do it regularly.

Third, marriage involves lots of forgiveness. Gobs of forgiveness. Mother Theresa used to caution ordinary people like us to "make your homes centers of compassion and forgiveness." One Christian leader defines a successful marriage as "two broken and forgiving people who stay committed to one another in a sacrificial relationship in the midst of life's chaos."<sup>4</sup> The Bible says, "Get rid of all bitterness," (be the way, if you have a detailed scorecard on your spouse, it's time to let it go) "rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:31-32).

If you're married, your marriage is a holy place. So if your marriage is deeply broken, it's worth it to pursue healing. If you're marriage is struggling, work on it and talk about it. If you're marriage is thriving, commit it afresh to God. Make it a place for God to display his glory and love.

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<sup>4</sup> Dan Allender and Tremper Longman, **Intimate Allies**, Page 347.