

Praying with the Bible as a couple: Marriage in the Bible

February 2021

Introduction Genesis 1

God's glory, his promises, and his plan for marriage: The beginning of Genesis

Marriage imagery forms the bookends of the Bible. The creation stories in Genesis are echoed throughout the Bible. They begin in the garden with the marriage of the man and his wife and conclude with the wedding feast of the Lamb in Revelation. The creation stories reveal God's desire to fill creation with his glory and to have human beings, human persons made in his own image and likeness, bring his wise and loving care to that creation. They would act as God's agents in free, loving obedience.

The creation stories and the whole story of God's relationship with Israel (and with us) are about the unconditional promises, the covenant, that God has made with us. Covenants bind two parties. Each party has obligations. The story of Israel, the story of the Church, our own personal stories participate in the reality of God's faithfulness and our failing. Over and over, a cycle of covenant blessings is followed by broken promises and infidelity on our part. That in turn is followed by punishment for sin: being kicked out of the garden, oppression by enemies, exile in Babylon. Each disobedience is followed by God's preserving of a remnant and his great mercy, his renewal of the covenant. His greatest act of mercy was the sending of his Son, whose death, resurrection, and sending of his Holy Spirit ushered in a new age. We are living in that new age. And marriage is a privileged image of that whole wonderful and sometimes tragic story.

God created the heavens and the earth to be a sacred space in which he would dwell with humankind. God would be present with us, and his glory would fill the whole earth. From the beginning, creation is our divinely gifted home and also our responsibility. However, something went horribly wrong. Adam and Eve rebelled, and it was necessary for God to rescue humanity before his big plan could go forward. Salvation, then, is the subplot in the bigger story of creation.

The Creator will rescue us. In a great act of love, he will destroy death, and we, with our resurrected bodies, will live with him forever in the new heaven and new earth. That is the glorious end of the story.

We now turn to the text itself. Genesis opens with two complementary accounts of creation. It is important to think of them as the creation of an ordered space in which God and humankind would dwell together, and to avoid getting distracted by modern controversies about creation and science.

It is helpful to keep two things in mind.

First, in ancient Israel and in the whole of the ancient world, life was extremely fragile. Life was never taken for granted. Even one's next meal was not taken for granted. Life spans were short, and life was hard. A woman might have many children, but only three or four would make it to adolescence. Fertility, of the husband and wife, the domestic animals, and the crops upon which their very lives depended, was exceedingly important.

The daily experience of struggling to scratch out a living would throw into sharp contrast the creation story with its description of a world teeming with life and its promises of children: "be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it." This story must have expressed the deepest and most heartfelt longing of a people deeply in touch with the rhythms and vicissitudes of ordinary life. The same hope would continue in God's people, and would be expressed later by the prophets, who would describe it as a hope for a new creation, the coming day of the Lord (beautiful examples are Amos 9:13 and Ezekiel 36:35).

Second, to debate whether the first chapter of Genesis is a scientific account or not is to fall into a trap.

The enlightened modern claim is that for something to be true, it must be scientifically verifiable. What follows, then, is that if the Bible is true, it must be scientifically (and historically) verifiable. This attitude would have been very foreign to the ancient human author of Genesis. Moreover, anyone who pays attention to the history of scientific discovery, or, for that matter, reads history books, knows that scientific knowledge is provisional. That is, its explanation of observable data changes with each new discovery, or new theory. The Bible makes an entirely different claim on truth. Its only claim about the creation of the material cosmos is that it was created. The real purpose of the creation stories is to tell the story of how the one God created an ordered, sacred space which is not part of him and in which he could dwell in relationship with human beings.

This story would have been highly subversive and dangerous to the ancient tellers. For in telling it, the sacred authors took their pagan neighbors' stories and re-crafted them, or actually turned them upside down. Ancient pagan myths included deified forces of nature, monsters, mortal combat and the bloody defeat of the primordial waters, dying and rising gods, and a constant violent struggle to bring forth life. In huge contrast, the biblical story is about the majestic power of the creator God and the goodness of his creation. The story says, among other things, that human beings are the pinnacle of creation, that maleness and femaleness are God's intention and are complementary, that this community of persons (husband and wife) is the image and likeness of the creator God, and that this community of persons is supposed to produce more persons (children). Can you imagine the fear and anger of a listening pagan priest who was sure that his bloodthirsty gods were being insulted?

At the end of the first story, we have a world that is filled with and reflects the glory of God. The heavens are teeming with birds, the waters with fish, and the dry land with

animals. Humanity (male and female), made in the image and likeness of the creator God, is to bring God's wise and loving care to that world. These are the beginnings of the heavens and the earth (Genesis 2:4a).

Let us dive in. The first five readings and meditations focus on the story of creation found in Genesis 1:1–2:4a. Then we present two psalms that celebrate this very creation.