

Building a Lasting Marriage

Restoring God's Design for Relationships



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Course Introduction

Building a Lasting Marriage is written to encourage you to follow God's design for your marriage, a design that was lovingly created by the God and Father who loves you and knows what is best for you. You can be sure that His plans are for your good and that He wants to bless you as you seek to obey Him.

Marriage is under attack today because many people in Western countries attempt to redefine it or to question its value as an institution of society. This course presents the view that, from the creation, marriage was instituted by God as the union of one man and one woman for a lifetime, and that its value is timeless because it serves as a reflection of God's love and commitment to His people.

Statistics indicate that many couples struggle to build a marriage that will last, that they lack understanding of God's blueprint for marriage, as well as instruction in the godly character that is essential to hold two people together as a couple in marriage. Perhaps you are very aware of the biblical teaching on marriage, but you may be encouraged by the examples of couples who have built a strong marriage and by practical suggestions of ways to apply what you know in the context of your own marriage.

Those who embark on such a study do so because they desire to pursue God's paths, even in the very personal area of marriage, where it is often difficult to admit that we struggle and that we need help. Regardless of the state of your marriage, there is hope. By the grace of God and with His help, we can rebuild a marriage that seems to be falling apart. If you are starting out as a married couple, this study can help you to begin on the right course, to build a marriage that will last for a lifetime. Whatever the state of your marriage, as you begin this study, may you feel God's pleasure as you pursue the goal you have set, the goal of building a stronger marriage that will ultimately bring honor and praise to His name.

Course Description

This course seeks to provide a biblically based understanding of key subjects that are essential in the life of every believer who wants to build a strong marriage. One of the goals of participating in such a course is to develop a stronger, more intimate relationship with your spouse and to learn ways of relating to one another that are pleasing to God. In each lesson you will study biblical passages that deal with

marriage and gain helpful insights, as well as practical suggestions on how to apply biblical principles to your marriage.

The first lessons focus on the biblical teaching regarding marriage—looking at God’s design for marriage, the results of the fall on marriages, and ways of restoring God’s design. These lessons will look at the importance of making your marriage the primary focus of your love and allegiance, and explore some practical implications of that. They will examine what it means to be united to your spouse in a “one flesh” union and consider ways to build greater intimacy in your relationship.

Dealing with unfulfilled needs and expectations in marriage also will be considered, as well as biblical teaching on accepting your spouse. We will examine biblical teaching directed at both wives and husbands, and consider the practical applications of this teaching. We will also look at practical suggestions on improving your communication as a couple and consider how to deal with the conflicts that arise in every marriage. Lesson 8 will focus on three anchors that are essential to making marriage last for a lifetime.

Two final lessons address key issues common to many people. The topic of singleness is considered in Lesson 9. The advantages of remaining single are discussed, along with practical counsel for living as a single person. This lesson may also be helpful to those who are considering whether to marry. Lesson 10 looks at the topic of living in an unequal partnership with an unbeliever and gives practical counsel and encouragement to those in this situation.

Contributions to Developing Character

This course is really about Christian character: about putting into practice the things you say you believe, as you interact on a daily basis with your spouse, who sees you at your best and at your worst. Each lesson in this course includes questions to encourage you to examine your life as you reflect on God’s Word, to make godly choices, and to consider ways in which you honor or dishonor God by your actions and attitudes toward your mate. Christian character is an outworking of your relationship with Christ, and this course encourages you to grow closer to Him and to deepen your dependence on Him, which will have its outworking in your relationships.

Contributions to Servant Leadership

Building a Lasting Marriage calls you to a closer relationship with Jesus Christ and to a life of relationship with your spouse that reflects that relationship with Christ. The focus is on loving and serving your spouse, as Christ loved and served the church, with a sacrificial love that is other-focused rather than self-focused. As you grow in Christlike character, the result will be an increasing desire to serve others; and this kind of servant leadership must begin at home.

Contributions to Developing Relationships

This course also encourages you to think about the importance of your marriage and to take steps to strengthen and build your relationship with your spouse, recognizing that your marriage is a picture of Christ's relationship to the Church, the people He chose for Himself.

Practical teaching is provided in the area of developing your relationship with your spouse, as well as in opportunities to reflect on your own behavior and attitudes and to interact with your mate. Personal Reflections are designed to encourage you to consider the effects of your choices and behavior on your spouse and on your relationship, and to develop in the areas of loving and serving your spouse. Specific skills are presented in some areas, such as communication and conflict resolution, to help you grow in these areas.

Course Objectives

When you have completed this course, you will be able to:

1. Experience a renewed desire to build your relationship with your spouse, relying on God to help you to love and serve your mate.
2. Explain the biblical teaching on Christian marriage, the results of the fall on Christian marriage, and the hope of restoring God's design for Christian marriages.
3. Discuss the implications of focusing your primary love and loyalty on your spouse and the consequences of failing to do so.
4. Outline a plan to build greater intimacy in your marriage by applying biblical teaching to your situation.
5. Evaluate your improvement in communication and listening skills and in exercising greater self-control in conflict situations.
6. Explain the biblical definitions of love, forbearance, and forgiveness.
7. Evaluate how you have grown in Christian character during your time of studying these lessons.
8. Explain the biblical teaching on singleness and on marriage to an unbeliever, and some positive ways of responding to these situations.

Course Outline

Lesson 1: Understanding God's Design for Marriage

Lesson 2: Love and Loyalty—Our Focus

Lesson 3: Two Shall Become One

Lesson 4: Reflecting Christ and the Church—The Roles of Husband and Wife

Lesson 5: Expectations and Acceptance

Lesson 6: Communication—The Key to Intimacy

Lesson 7: Dealing with Conflict

Lesson 8: Anchoring Your Marriage

Lesson 9: The Gift of Singleness

Lesson 10: Living in an Unequal Partnership

Contributions to the Total Curriculum

Building a Lasting Marriage is planned to enhance and build on the foundational courses of the Entrust curriculum, courses that are designed to train leaders in key areas essential for Christian maturity and ministry. The course presents biblical teaching and the opportunity to grow in relational skills, and it suggests practical applications that are essential for every Christian who seeks to honor God in marriage. Married life can never be separated from a life of service to God. You cannot neglect those to whom you have committed yourself for a lifetime and at the same time please God in your ministry. All of life is sacred, and God wants to use marriage to reflect His glory to the world around us, a world that is sadly in need of models of godly Christian families.

This course will enable you to become more competent in the areas of leadership and discipling. You will gain skills in communication and conflict resolution that are essential for discipling and leading others.

Student Instructions

In order to benefit most from your study of this material, you should plan to work through the lessons in the order they are presented. In other words, you are encouraged to work through the course systematically rather than choosing a topic in the middle of the course as a place to begin.

Before you begin Lesson 1, we suggest you acquire a notebook. This will become your *Life and Ministry Notebook* for recording a variety of insights for your own life and for ministering to others. You will use this notebook to write your responses to Assignments and other questions in the lessons. It is also a place where you can record your thoughts from the Personal Reflections, as well as any questions or problems you encounter in the course.

You should allow yourself a minimum of two to three hours of study time to complete each lesson. This will include doing the required reading and completing the Assignments and Personal Reflections.

Course Design

The course objectives listed above summarize the most important things you will learn as you do the lessons. Study these objectives carefully and refer to them periodically as you work your way through the course.

Since most individuals taking this course are extremely busy people, we have designed each lesson with clearly defined steps for easy reference. Also, if you study the Course Objectives and Lesson Objectives, you will know from the start on which topics to spend the most time.

Lesson Design

Several standard components are built into each lesson to facilitate your study and develop your skills and character. They are explained below so that you may recognize and use them to full advantage:

1. **Lesson Objectives** are provided to help you identify the most crucial parts of each lesson. They guide you in the effective use of your study time and will be used by your group leader for class discussion.
2. **Lesson Outlines** provide an overview of the sections of each lesson. In this way you can anticipate the flow and sequence of the various topics to be covered before you begin your study.
3. **Repetition and review** are woven into the course to help you learn new concepts.
4. **Assignments** offer you the opportunity to interact with the material being covered. Whenever you see this icon, stop and record what is required in your *Life and Ministry Notebook*.
5. **Personal Reflections** stimulate you to think more deeply about material covered and about life and ministry. These are an important part of your growth. Paul says we are “transformed by the renewing of our mind” (Rom 12:2). Whenever you see this icon, please respond to the Personal Reflections. Recording your thoughts in a notebook can be a valuable way of seeing how God is at work in changing the way you think.
6. **Adorations** arise from the lesson content related to the Person and work of God. They encourage you to respond to what God is saying to you as you study, to thank Him and to praise Him. Whenever you see this icon, pause from your study to respond to God.
7. **Appendices** offer resources and useful reference materials that may be of benefit to you both in the course and in your marriage. These are placed at the end of the workbook.

Materials Needed

To work through this course, you will need a **Bible**, a copy of this **workbook**, and your **Life and Ministry Notebook** for all written work. Unless otherwise noted, all the Scripture references and Scripture quotations in this workbook are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

Icons



Assignment: a question or study that focuses on course content. Written responses are required and are to be recorded in your *Life and Ministry Notebook*.



Personal Reflection: an instruction to reflect on scriptural truths or character traits or both as they relate to one's walk with God. The focus is on personal application. A written response may be requested.



Adoration: an instruction to worship the Lord with reference to course content. The focus is on God. No written response is required.

Understanding God's Design for Marriage

Nick and Maria have been married for seven years, but they are disappointed in their marriage. They were expecting to grow in their love for each other and to experience increasing closeness in their relationship, but that has not happened. Instead, they sense a growing distance between them. With two small children, their lives revolve around responsibilities at home and at work. Nick's temper often flares when he is tired, and Maria has become increasingly critical of him, pointing out his mistakes and shortcomings. They wonder if they made a mistake in getting married, and both have asked themselves if life would be better if they divorced.

Lesson Outline

- A Perfect World—Shattered
- The Broken Template
- Recognizing Our Sinful Patterns
- Restoring God's Design
 - God's Purposes for Marriage
 - The Deeper Significance of Marriage
 - The Permanence of Marriage
- God's Design under Attack
- The Big Question

Lesson Objectives

When you have completed this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Explain God's design for marriage, including His purposes for marriage and the deeper significance of marriage.
2. Describe the ways in which the fall of Adam and Eve affected relationships in marriage.

3. Enumerate some of the ways in which God's design is under attack in modern society.
4. Evaluate your life in terms of the sinful patterns you have brought into your own marriage.
5. Assess your willingness to apply the truths in this lesson and to set a priority on restoring God's design in your own marriage.

A Perfect World—Shattered

"In the beginning God created . . ." The wonderful works of God's creation are on display for us to admire every day—light and darkness, oceans and skies, the incredible diversity of the plant and animal kingdom. As God created the plants, the sun, moon, and stars, the swarms of living creatures on land and in the sea, He looked upon His created work and saw that it was good.

But the crowning work of God's creation was yet to come. In Genesis 2 we read that God created the first man out of the dust of the ground and breathed the breath of life into him. God then took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to care for it. Adam was given an ideal place to live and meaningful work—authority and responsibility to care for the earth, for every living creature that God had created on land and in the sea. His life lay before him, and it was perfect. There was just one thing missing. Adam was alone, and God saw that it was not good for him to be alone.

In Genesis 2 we read that God gave Adam the job of naming all the living creatures. As He paraded the animals before Adam, Adam observed that every other creature had a mate, but there was no companion for Adam. God then lovingly provided the life partner that Adam was missing. While Adam slept, God took one of his ribs and created a woman from Adam's own body, a being perfectly suited to him. Like a father bringing his daughter to her betrothed husband, God brought the woman to Adam when he awoke. We sense Adam's excitement and pleasure in his reaction to the perfect, delightful, wonderful creature that came from his own body. God's provision was perfectly designed to complement Adam. Creation was complete with this final act of forming the first man and first woman. Genesis 1:27 says, "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them."

In creating the woman, God said that He would give Adam a "helper suitable" for him. The word "suitable" means "corresponding (to him)," or "appropriate (to him)." Adam's life partner would complement him physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. After describing the creation of the woman, Moses, under divine inspiration, added this commentary in Genesis 2:24, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh."

From the beginning of creation, marriage was a significant part of God's design—a design that fit His purposes, and a design that brought blessing and satisfaction to the beloved man and woman created in His own image. Like all that He had created, God's design for marriage was perfect, delightful, and fulfilling, with no shadow of disappointment on the horizon. Adam and Eve would work together as a team, caring for the plants and animals, and caring for one another, expressing their love to God and living in close relationship with Him.

For a time Adam and Eve enjoyed the perfect marriage; they were two whole, complete, loving, perfect beings who would share the work and the wonder of Eden. They were able to love, able to give, able to be completely open with one another. They were safe and secure with God and each other. Their needs, physical and emotional, were fully provided. They were naked, not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually, completely open to one another. There were no barriers in their relationship. They experienced no misunderstandings, no mistrust, no competition, no power struggles, no guilt, no vengeance, no harsh words, no fear, no need to hide.

Sadly, Adam and Eve did not live happily ever after in this state of bliss. If they had, you would not be studying this course! Their story did not have a happy ending. Satan approached the woman, in the form of a serpent, and tempted her to eat the fruit of the one forbidden tree that God had placed in the Garden. Eve's first mistake was listening to Satan; then, she engaged in conversation with him. He planted doubt in her mind regarding what God had said and twisted God's words to make it sound as if God was withholding something good from her. The fruit looked delicious and beautiful, and the serpent told her it would make her as wise as God. Believing Satan's lies, she reached out, took the fruit and ate it. Adam, too, disobeyed and ate of the forbidden fruit. This disobedience we call the fall.

At that moment in time, all of life changed. In choosing to disobey God, Adam and Eve declared their independence from Him. They turned away from the perfect life that God had offered them. Their relationship with Him was broken, and their relationship to one another was also broken. Immediate barriers were erected between them.



Every day in human history—and every person who has ever lived—has been deeply affected by that day, by that choice. God’s perfect plan for uniting man and woman as one flesh has also been affected. The two human beings who now come together in marriage are deeply flawed. Immediately after the fall, we see the change.



Read Genesis 3:6-24.

1. Whom did Adam blame for what had happened? Whom did Eve blame?
2. What patterns began immediately?
3. What consequences did Adam and Eve face as a result of sin?
4. How do these consequences affect marriages today?

Adam and Eve faced some immediate consequences, such as having to leave the beautiful garden home they had enjoyed, never to return. There were also internal consequences; their very nature changed. While they did not physically die until some years later, they died spiritually. In the Genesis account we can see evidence that this change took place immediately: They became selfish, began to put their own needs first, and started to criticize one another. They no longer had mutual respect and trust for one another. Earlier they were both naked and unashamed, knowing that they were completely accepted by the other. Now their nakedness brought shame and the end of openness and honesty in their relationship. They tried to clothe themselves in an effort to cover their nakedness. We see the origin of self-centered behavior—hypocrisy and self-justification.

Other long-range consequences were also soon obvious. Imagine their sorrow when the first child born to them after their disobedience became a murderer, killing their beloved second son, Abel. In a moment of hatred and jealousy, these first parents lost two sons. Sin altered everything in their world. Jealousy, hatred, strife, rage, murder, self-centeredness, anger, shame, hiding, lying, denying—all these entered the ideal world God had created. There were no longer any pure motives. The world was ravaged by sin. The resulting scars would affect every generation to come.

When you receive an invitation to a wedding, you think of the joyful celebration that takes place as two individuals commit themselves to one another for a lifetime. You think of the potential for a couple to grow together, love, share and give to each other. Yet the reality is that there will be no perfect marriage characterized by total oneness such as God designed in the beginning of creation. Once they are married, couples are often surprised because the intimacy and sharing they had hoped for in marriage is limited or even absent. They are disappointed that their inner needs are not met by their partner.

Ever since the day of Adam and Eve's choice, God's perfect plan for marriage has been deeply etched with pain brought about by sinful behavior. We will never experience the ideal marriage Adam and Eve knew before the fall because the man and woman who enter into marriage are each deeply flawed human beings. Something is wrong inside us that affects the way we relate to one another. Sin has distorted the way we think, the way we feel, the way we act.

The Broken Template

The Genesis account explains that God's design for marriage was deeply affected by the fall. The perfect template for marriage was broken by the first husband and wife. Since that day, every person born into the world is born into a family that is tainted by sin. There are no perfect parents. Whether or not our parents are Christians, all families experience the taint of sin. "We are all products of parents who were sinners, just as our children will be. We must realize that imperfect parents always cause some degree of pain to their children. The baton that is passed from one generation to the next is always at least a little disfigured, a little scarred."¹ The broken template will be reflected in every marriage. Often we carry the same patterns we experienced as children into our marriage, or we go to the opposite extreme.

Barbara's parents argued frequently, raising their voices and using name-calling and swearing. Barbara learned early to keep her feelings to herself, lest she find herself the object of her parents' anger. As an adult she finds it difficult to express any emotions, and she withdraws and avoids all conflict. These habits have created distance in her relationship with her husband.

James comes from a home where his mother was highly controlling. His father tried to keep the peace in their home by saying little. As an adult, James finds himself seeking to control his wife in inappropriate ways, by shouting, demanding, and even resorting on occasion to violence. These patterns have not brought about a close relationship but have created mistrust and disrespect in their family.

Many of us move into marriage without giving much thought to what we have learned about it from our own family. What have we seen modeled? Were our role models positive or negative? How did those models affect us?

We each have been influenced by the home we grew up in—our attitudes, values, behavior, and ways of communicating have all been affected by our upbringing. Children who grow up in a home where their parents have a strong relationship generally have a greater sense of security and a better role model to follow when they marry, but there will still be some sinful patterns that they have not dealt with. If you grew up in a home with only one parent, there will be some distinct gaps in your experience since you have not seen two adults interacting, dealing with conflict, and working through problems.

Our parents' model often greatly influences our thoughts about marriage, and even our expectations of what marriage will be like. "After marriage we tend to act married in the way we saw marriage lived out."² Considering the influences of our home-life while growing up can be helpful in leading us to recognize our own sinful patterns. If you are contemplating marriage, it is important to realize the effect that your own home has had on shaping you, and the effect your future spouse's family has had in shaping him or her.

Some of us grew up in homes where our parents were good role models. We grew up in a loving, responsible family, and we saw what it looks like to care for others, to give sacrificially, to reach out, to nurture and encourage, to speak kindly and tactfully. Families like this are striving to live according to God's design for marriage. Yet even those who grow up in caring Christian families will bring sinful patterns to marriage. All families struggle with the heritage of sin; we make selfish choices; we are not mature in some areas. In the end, we are focused on getting what we want.

Many people come from homes where they have not experienced a loving father or mother or learned to care for others and treat them with kindness. Many people also come to marriage looking for someone to make them whole, to fill in the gaps that they experienced as a child. Some people come to marriage looking primarily to receive, rather than to give to someone else. When we have not experienced a loving family, we will likely bring destructive patterns to our marriage.



Write down your thoughts on the following questions:

1. How did your parents reflect God's design for marriage?
2. Were they warm and nurturing, providing order and discipline?
3. What aspects of your parents' relationship do you respect or admire?
4. Have you thanked them?



1. In what ways did your parents reflect the broken template? Were they too busy, absent, or too rigid?
2. What characteristics of your parents' relationship would you want to avoid?
3. Have you forgiven your parents for hurts you experienced because of their fallen nature?



1. What patterns do you have that are similar to your parents' patterns?
2. What patterns do you have that are different from the ones you saw growing up?
3. In what ways would it be helpful to get to know your partner's parents and family before you marry?
4. How could you learn the ways this family relates to each other?

We may not make the same mistakes our parents made, but we can be sure we will make mistakes of our own—in our marriage and in our child rearing. Even with our best efforts to do things right, we will find that our sin nature continues to influence us.

Recognizing Our Sinful Patterns

As a result of sin's entrance into the world, every man and woman is born with a sin nature, a tendency to sin. In addition to that, we each choose to sin. Not only do we grow up in families affected by sin, but from the time we are children, we begin to develop our own sinful habits and patterns. Left to ourselves, we will take these sinful patterns into marriage. As a result, we will come to marriage with gaps, with holes, with areas where we are immature, selfish, or needy.

These sinful patterns will hurt and possibly even destroy our marriages, unless we are willing to allow God to change us and to restore us to live in dependence on Him.

The first step in curbing sinful patterns in your life is recognizing them. Strategies and techniques to improve your marriage will not help unless you see your own sinful patterns, have a desire to change, and rely on God's power to help.



1. If you are married, what negative patterns or habits do you think you may have brought to your own marriage?
2. How have these habits affected your marriage?
3. Consider Adam and Eve's responses to one another after the fall. How do habits of blaming, shaming, lying, self-justification, or hypocrisy appear in your marriage?
4. How can God help you to change some of your negative patterns?



1. If you are not married, what negative patterns have you observed in other people's marriages?
2. Are any of these negative patterns cultural in origin?
3. How could you counsel couples to change these patterns?



Are you willing to let go of these sinful habits in order to see change and growth in your relationships? If not, consider why you might be choosing to hold on to these habits.

Restoring God's Design

We were created by a perfect God to live a perfect life, in harmony with our Creator, with others, and with nature. That basic truth may explain the deep longings we have for a perfect world. One of those longings is the longing for close, intimate relationship.



1. What do you long for in marriage?
2. What do you think would bring you the greatest joy in marriage?
3. Write down some of your thoughts.

Common answers to the questions in Assignment 7 include a desire to be loved and to love, to be accepted and understood, to belong, to make a valuable contribution to someone in life, to have children. Most of us have a desire for a close, intimate relationship with someone who will love and accept us as we are. Not only do we long for relationship, we cannot thrive without it. Studies show that infants deprived of loving nurturing and touch will become handicapped or even die, even though all their basic physical needs are met. Even as adults, when we feel unloved, when no one cares enough to attend to our needs, we wither on the inside.

The things we long for are good things, things that God created us to enjoy: love, trust, security, purpose, closeness, tenderness. Yet as the Genesis account explained, we are a fallen people, prone to sin and selfishness. We need to be rescued from ourselves. As a sinful person, is there any hope of creating a whole and healthy relationship with another person?

The good news of the gospel makes it possible. God sent a Savior to set us free from sin. Change has been made possible by Jesus Christ, who died on the cross to

bear the penalty of our sin, so that we can be restored to a relationship with God. We can be reconciled to God through Christ, as we trust Him as Savior and receive His offer of forgiveness. The relationship with God that was broken can be restored because God has made a way for us to come to Him. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (Jn 14:6). In John 1:12 we read, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become the children of God, even to those who believed in His Name.”

Not only can we be reconciled to God, we can be reconciled to one another. God has given us the power to love with His love, and He has given grace to transform us. Though our sinful habits are deeply rooted, and we are essentially selfish people, we are given the power to change. The Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead lives in us and sets us free from bondage to our old sinful patterns (Rom 8:1-11). If the Holy Spirit is powerful enough to raise Jesus from the dead, He is powerful enough to change us and to show us how to love our spouses.

As we see our sinful patterns and their consequences, as we desire to change, and as we rely on the Holy Spirit to help us, our marriages can become places of safety, trust, and love.

God is the One who designed us and who designed marriage. As a result of the fall, we are deeply flawed, yet God did not articulate a new plan to take the place of His original plan for marriage. He created us for relationship with Him and with one another, and He created the partnership of marriage as the primary way of fulfilling our need for relationship.

While the fall changed the marital relationship forever, God’s ideal for marriage as articulated in Genesis 1-2 nonetheless continued to set the standard for the responsibilities and roles of husbands and wives toward each other in the subsequent history of humanity.³

God has given us the design, and He has given us a guidebook to help as we build a relationship together. What is wrong with us cannot be fixed unless we are willing to do it God’s way. If we are willing to trust that our Creator knows what is best for us, there is hope to build and restore our relationships.



Take time to thank God for His wonderful provision of the partnership of marriage, and for making it possible through Christ for you to experience His restored design in your own marriage.

As we explore God's design for marriage and commit ourselves to following the guidelines He has set out for us, we come closer to the image of God and to restoring the original design for marriage. The next section looks at that design.

God's Purposes for Marriage

Why did God design marriage? What purposes does it serve? In the first two chapters of Genesis we find several reasons for the creation of this special marriage relationship between a man and a woman. The first purpose is found in Genesis 1:26-27.



Read Genesis 1:26-27. What purposes for marriage do you see in these verses?

This passage says that God made man in His own image. By the use of plural pronouns, Genesis 1:26 suggests that God is relational: "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness." Communion and relationship exist between the Persons of the Godhead. One aspect of being in God's image is the desire and ability to relate to others. As the Persons of the Trinity have a relationship with one another, so humans created in God's image were designed to desire and to enjoy relationships with others.

After God created man, He recognized that because of the way man was designed, it was not good for him to be alone (Gen 2:18). Man's need for relationship was part of his design. God therefore fulfilled this need by making a helper suitable to him, woman.



Read Genesis 1:28 and 2:18, 21-24. What other purposes for marriage do you find in these passages?

God's design for marriage is that it reflect His image through the most intimate of human relationships, that it provide the means for the propagation of the human race, and that marriage provide a complementary, permanent companion for life.

Marriage is the most intimate of all human relationships, uniting a man and a woman in a bond that God calls "one flesh." What does it mean for man and woman to become "one flesh"? "While 'one flesh' suggests sexual intercourse and normally procreation, at its very heart the concept entails the establishment of a new kinship relationship between two previously unrelated individuals by the most intimate of human bonds."⁴

The Deeper Significance of Marriage

Marriage has been defined as the union of two people for a lifetime. This in itself is a beautiful and meaningful definition, yet the Bible declares that there is even greater significance and value in marriage.



Read Ephesians 5:22-33. What significance does this passage give to marriage?

The New Testament reveals a greater significance in God's design for marriage. Marriage is a sacred covenant before God between two people who pledge their love and loyalty to one another, a covenant that reflects Christ's covenant to the church. Marriage is thus a picture of God's covenant commitments to His people; and His commitments are permanent.

Marriage points to Christ's covenant with the church. Christ is described as a bridegroom coming for His bride. He paid for His bride with His own blood and formed an indissoluble union with her. He loves her with an everlasting love and forgives her sins completely. He promises to never leave or forsake His bride, to protect and provide for her. Ultimately, marriage exists to bring glory and honor to God by presenting a picture of Christ and His church. "Marriage exists to display the merciful covenant-keeping love of Christ and the faithfulness of His bride."⁵

Seen in this light, it is clear that divorce and adultery misrepresent Christ's covenant love for the church, since Christ never breaks His covenant with His people even when they are unfaithful to Him.⁶ Divorce therefore denies the ultimate significance of marriage and reflects a false picture of God. God's design for marriage is for two people to be bound by a covenant to be faithful to their spouse for a lifetime and to live out a life of love, forgiveness, and grace in the closest possible relationship in the human sphere.

"Staying married, therefore, is not mainly about staying in love. It is about keeping covenant," says pastor and author John Piper.⁷ Rather than giving up on our marriages, God wants us to reflect Jesus Christ in our firm commitment to each other and in the way we treat each other.



If marriage is a picture of Christ and the church, what kind of picture is your marriage displaying?

How can we reflect Jesus Christ to our spouses, given the extent of the damage resulting from the fall? The answer to this question is suggested as early as Genesis

3:21, where we read that God made clothes to cover the nakedness of Adam and Eve. Piper reflects on this act:

Negatively, he (God) is saying: You are not what you were, and you are not what you ought to be. The chasm between what you are and what you ought to be is huge. Covering yourself with clothing is a right response to this—not to conceal it, but to confess it. Henceforth, you shall wear clothing, not to conceal that you are not what you should be, but to confess that you are not what you should be.⁸

When God clothed Adam and Eve with animal skins, it was “not only a witness to the glory we lost and a confession that we are not what we should be, but it is also a testimony that God Himself would one day make us what we should be.”⁹ He would cover our shame and clothe us with the perfect righteousness of Christ. Our clothing is thus not only a picture of our past and present failure but of the reality of Christ’s saving work for us and our future glory.¹⁰

Although we are deeply flawed by sin, God has provided a covering for us, the blood of Jesus Christ His Son.



Read Romans 3:21-26 and 2 Corinthians 5:21. What do you learn from these passages about righteousness?

God transfers the righteousness of His Son to those who believe in Him as Savior. In other words, God declares that the believer is righteous in His sight.

God not only gives every believer the righteousness of Christ, He gives every believer the power of the Holy Spirit within to make it possible to overcome the power of sin. Through the Holy Spirit in us God makes it possible to love, to give, to sacrifice ourselves for the good of others. When we learn to live and love following the example of Christ, others begin to see Christ in us.

Even when relationships have been badly damaged, we can rebuild the broken walls, restore the broken relationships, and renew our love for one another.



Read Philippians 4:13 and 2 Peter 1:3-4. What resources does the Christian have for living the Christian life?

If we are followers of Jesus Christ, we cannot excuse ourselves on the basis of lack of resources, for God has given us what we need to act in love and kindness toward our spouses. We have to be willing to make a commitment to do all that God

calls us to do to treat our spouses in loving ways and rely on Him to give us what we need: strength, courage, love, comfort, understanding, forgiveness, and hope.

If you commit yourself to your spouse for a lifetime and seek to reflect God's covenant love in your marriage, you will see God at work, changing you, making you more like Christ. It will require humbling yourself repeatedly. It will require reminding yourself that as you seek to love and serve your spouse, you are seeking to please God. It will require deep dependence on God. Ultimately, this choice will bring honor to God and reflect His faithfulness. "God gets glory when two very different and very imperfect people forge a life of faithfulness in the furnace of affliction by relying on Christ."¹¹



What thoughts were new to you in this section on the significance of marriage? How has your thinking been challenged?

The Permanence of Marriage

Marriage is intended to be a permanent commitment that mirrors the commitment of God to His people. Both partners make a solemn promise or pledge, before God and to their marriage partner, to be faithful for a lifetime. Even admitting the possibility of divorce will hinder efforts to build a good marriage.



Read Genesis 1:27 and 2:23-24.

1. Summarize what these passages say.
2. Explain what Jesus added to the Genesis account in Matthew 19:3-6 and Mark 10:2-12.

Notice that Jesus attributes the words of Moses to God, "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'?" Jesus affirmed the permanence of marriage, adding the words, "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." He considered marriage a sacred and permanent bond between a man and a woman who have been united by God Himself.

During Jesus' time, divorce had become a common practice in Israel. And although the seventh commandment said, "You shall not commit adultery," adultery was also common. The Pharisees had come to Jesus with a question about divorce, with the purpose of testing Jesus. Their question reflected the popular arguments of

the day regarding the occasions when it might be lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Moses gave regulations for the practice of divorce, limiting the causes to uncleanness and indecency or immorality (see Deut 24:1-4). Moses referred to cases of incest, harlotry, or habitual sexual promiscuity. The Jewish rabbis in Jesus' day twisted the word "uncleanness" to mean any minor fault. If a wife burned the soup or failed to please her husband in any small way, it might be considered grounds for divorce, according to these false teachers.

In His reply, Jesus returned to the original design for marriage described in the Genesis account. Using the words, "what God has joined together," Jesus indicated that God Himself has joined a husband and wife. From His viewpoint, marriage is an indissoluble divine union not to be annulled by any human agency. Death should be the only means by which this union is broken.

In many cultures divorce has become common, and people assume that it is reasonable to end a marriage that does not seem to be working well. Yet God says that He hates divorce (Mal 2:15-16). What makes divorce so terrible in God's eyes is not only that it involves breaking the covenant between a man and a woman, but it involves misrepresenting Christ and His covenant to all believers. The church is the bride of Christ, and Christ will never leave His wife. He will always keep His covenant with us; He is faithful even when we are faithless. When we keep our covenant pledge to our spouses, we portray this truth about Jesus Christ to the world around us.

God's Design under Attack

The Creator's design for marriage states that "A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." Marriage was designed to be a covenant relationship between one man and one woman. This is clearly the only possible definition of marriage, as the man and woman were commanded to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Gen 1:28). Same-sex intercourse cannot possibly lead to bearing children. Even the animals were created male and female, each after its kind (Gen 1:21, 24-25).

Marriage was also designed as an exclusive relationship. For this reason, Jesus treated sexual immorality by a married person (Matt 19:9), including even lustful thoughts (Matt 5:27-30), as a serious breach. For this reason, too, premarital sex is illegitimate, since it violates the exclusive nature of one's future marriage. Some of these ideas are labeled harsh, unrealistic, or old-fashioned, yet they are God's thoughts, expressed with His concern for your well-being. Many people think that love and judgment are mutually exclusive, that if you love people you will never say anything that will make them uncomfortable. Yet Jesus did not hesitate to speak out against sin. In His great love for people He wanted them to know the truths that

would set them free to live in obedience to God and in loving relationship with one another.

Jesus affirmed God's design for marriage to be a lifelong, monogamous relationship, a sacred bond between a man and a woman. With the prevalence of divorce today, you might well ask, "Does God's design still work? Is it outdated? Are there other options for lifestyles?"

When you look at the history of God's people in the Old Testament, you immediately see that God's ideal of marriage was often perverted by sin. Practices such as polygamy, adultery, homosexuality, and divorce began within just a few generations of the fall.

The seventh commandment forbids adultery (Exod 20:14), and under Jewish law premarital sex was also either punishable by death or the couple was expected to marry (see Deut 22:23-29; Exod 22:16). Polygamy was a departure from God's plan that led to jealousy, favoritism, and competition. You see the effects of this sin in the polygamous marriages of Jacob (Gen 29:30-34; 30:14-16) and Elkanah (1 Sam 1:4-8).

Israel's kings were commanded not to take many wives, lest these wives turn their heart away from God (Deut 17:17). Breaking that command led to incest and murder in David's family. Solomon's marriage to many foreign wives was what led him to turn away from God (1 Kgs 11:4). Marrying a spouse who does not love the Lord is a danger that God warned against in both the Old Testament and in the New Testament (Deut 7:1-4; 2 Cor 6:14).

Incest was clearly prohibited for God's people (Lev 18:6-18). One of David's own sons broke this command and brought death, disharmony, and long-lasting consequences to David's household (2 Sam 13).

Homosexuality developed as an aberrant behavior in rebellion against God's design. God forbade a man to sleep with another male as with a woman, describing it as an abomination (Lev 18:22). In the period of the law, homosexuality was a sin punishable by death (Lev 20:13). The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were brought under judgment, in part, by the sin of homosexuality practiced by many of their inhabitants (Gen 19:1-29¹²). In the New Testament, Paul repeatedly speaks of homosexuality as a sinful practice, one of the undesirable moral consequences of the sin of rejecting God (Rom 1:24-27; 1 Cor 6:9-10).

Today, homosexuality is often viewed as part of God's design and defended by those who insist on the right to express every sexual preference. Yet God's creation of Eve demonstrates that His plan for marriage was for it to be a monogamous, heterosexual relationship. God made only one suitable helper for man, and she was female.¹³



1. What standards are prevalent in your culture on the issues of homosexuality, polygamy, adultery, and premarital sex?
2. What changes have you seen in values concerning marriage during the last twenty years?

The institution of marriage, as designed by God, is under attack and is being steadily eroded by many forces in society. In some societies marriage is no longer defined as the union of one man and one woman; relationships between two men or two women are referred to as marriage, showing the decline in values that reflect understanding of God's ways. In many countries people go from spouse to spouse, in what one author calls "serial polygamy."¹⁴ In some places couples no longer feel a need to get married but live together freely outside the bounds of marriage. Young people coming from broken homes often fear the commitment that marriage requires, or do not have the relational skills that it takes to build a lasting marriage.

In a world that values what feels good and that has no standard of objective truth to turn to, God's standards shine like diamonds on a dark background. His standards seem harsh to many people, yet the Creator knows that they were designed for our good. They were designed to reflect His own love and faithfulness to us. They have stood the test of time, and God promises that those who follow His ways will be blessed.

The Big Question

We have seen that God is the grand designer of marriage and that He created it for our good and for His glory. His design is the only one that will bring blessing to us; when we wander from that design, we will experience sorrow and loss. As we seek to reflect the covenant love of Christ for His church in our marriages, we will experience God's strengthening and His blessing. We will learn what it means to depend on Him. We will learn what it means to truly love our spouses, with a love that is willing to sacrifice for the good of our spouses and for the sake of keeping our covenant.



Think back to Nick and Maria at the beginning of this lesson. In the midst of an unhappy relationship, it seems to them that they need to get out of their relationship in order to preserve their own lives.

1. Would they really be happier apart from each other? Why or why not?
2. What would it take for them to hold on to their marriage and begin to work at making it into a union that would glorify God and bring

greater security and fulfillment to both of them? What choices do they need to make?



As you consider the topic of marriage, the big question is what matters most to you. Do you value your marriage enough to work at it, to make it a priority in your life? Above all, do you value pleasing God? Are you willing to obey Him and seek to restore His design in your marriage?

Elisabeth Elliot writes, “One who loves Him does what He says, cost what it may.”¹⁵ Obedience will cost you, but God’s Word makes it clear that whatever it costs, God will repay you many times over, not only in this life, but in the life to come.



Take some time to talk to the Lord and to seek His help and counsel for your marriage. Ask Him to help you make choices that will strengthen the bond you have with your spouse.

ENDNOTES

¹ Bill Hybels, *Interactions Small Group Series: Building Real Intimacy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 17.

² John and Agnes Sturt, *Mentoring for Marriage* (Auckland, New Zealand: DayStar Publications Trust, 2004), 29.

³ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *God, Marriage and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 38.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁵ John Piper, *This Momentary Marriage* (Nottingham, England: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 38.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹² See also Judg 19:1-21:25; 1 Kgs 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; 2 Kgs 23:7.

¹³ Elisabeth Elliot, *What God Has Joined* (Westchester, IL: Good News, 1983).

¹⁴ Dan Allender and Tremper Longman III, *Intimate Allies* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1995), 216.

¹⁵ Elliot.