

gospel-centred

Marriage

*becoming the couple
God wants you to be*

Tim Chester

Gospel-centred marriage

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Introduction

The reign of Solomon was the golden age of Israel's history, a period of great learning, wisdom and literature. Some of this was inspired by God's Spirit and so became part of God's word: wisdom for life, meditations on suffering, songs of praise. One of these books is called Solomon's *Song of Songs*, a way of saying that this is *the best* of songs. How does this best of songs begin? "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth – for your love is more delightful than wine" (Song 1 v 1-2). They are the words of a young woman asking for a kiss. The song is a celebration of romance, marriage, sex and kissing.

This book is about gospel-centred marriage. Most of what the Bible has to say about marriage does not come flagged up under a heading of "marriage". It's not just the famous "marriage passages" that shape a gospel-centred marriage, but the whole Bible-story of God's good creation, humanity's wicked rebellion and God's gracious redemption. To understand why marriages struggle—as they all do—we need to understand the nature of our sin. To make marriages work, we need to understand how to apply the truth about God and His salvation.

We'll discover, too, that perhaps the main reason why God created marriage and sexuality was to teach us the nature of His passionate commitment to His people. So marriage illustrates the gospel. The more we understand about the gospel, the more our marriages will be fit for purpose. And the more our marriages are fit for purpose, the better they will proclaim the gospel to people around us.

A couple of words of caution before we begin.

First, people often, unhelpfully, make their personal experience normative—the measure of everyone else's experience. This is especially true in marriage. So let's try to hear what God says in His word, rather than assume that our perspective is the rule.

And let's try to hear what God is saying *to us* in His word. We all

have a tendency to apply Scripture to others before we apply it to ourselves. Again, this is especially true in marriage. So think about yourself first and foremost as you read, rather than about your spouse or other people you know.

Second, there are no perfect marriages. No perfect wives. No perfect husbands. Except Jesus Christ.

But there is an endless supply of grace. The church is the bride for whom Christ “gave himself up ... to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5 v 25-27). There’s no need to hide or pretend. To a greater or lesser extent, you are a failure as a husband or wife. But the blood of Jesus covers and forgives that failure.

A few reflection questions are specific to those approaching marriage, but apart from that, I’ve written this book both for couples who have been married for many years and for people who are preparing to get married. What I’ve not included is material on raising children. For a gospel-centred approach to parenting, see the companion volume *Gospel-centred family*, available from The Good Book Company.

Finding your way around



Consider this

A scenario—often based on a real-life situation—which raises some kind of dilemma or frustration in marriage.



Biblical background

A relevant Bible passage together with some questions to help you think it through.



Read all about it

A discussion of the principle, both in terms of its theological underpinning and its contemporary application.



Questions for reflection



Questions that can be used for group discussion or personal reflection.



Ideas for action

Some ideas or an exercise to help people think through the application of the principle to their own situation.

We have tried to make this book work:

-  whether it is read by an individual or used as the basis for group discussion.
-  whether you want to work through it systematically or turn to particular topics as they arise.

1

Marriage and the passion of God

Principle

Your marriage is an illustration of the relationship of Christ to His people.



Consider this

Tom and Mary are about to have sex for the first time. It's their fourth date. They've been to see a movie and now Mary has invited Tom back for "coffee".

Across town, Jake and Sue are also about to have sex for the first time. It's their honeymoon night. The wedding was great—well, except for one family argument and one vomiting child. They're tired, but excited.

What does each couple feel about having sex for the first time? What difference do Jake and Sue's wedding vows make to the way they feel about sex?

Three weeks later Tom and Mary are arguing. Across town, so are Jake and Sue. Both arguments are heated: shouting, tears, silence.

What does each couple feel about their argument? What difference do Jake and Sue's wedding vows make to the way they feel about conflict?



Biblical background

Read Hosea chapters 1 – 3

- ? How does Hosea's marriage point to God's relationship with His people?
- ? Identify some of the emotional language used to describe God's relationship with His people.



Read all about it

“Marriage is not a word. It’s a sentence.

A life sentence.”

“All men are born free, but some of them get married.”

“I never knew what happiness was until I got married and by then it was too late.”

“When a man holds a woman’s hand before marriage, it is love; after marriage, it is self-defence.”

“Love is holding hands in the street; marriage is holding arguments in the street.”

Our culture doesn’t always have a high view of marriage. The evidence suggests that married couples enjoy better sex than co-habiting couples, but you’d never guess that from movies and television. We have thousands of songs about falling in and out of love. Very few celebrate staying in love.

We all bring baggage to marriage. The baggage of our parents’ marriage, past relationships, current tensions, cultural perspectives. All this can make it hard for us to grasp God’s remarkable and beautiful vision of marriage. There’s nothing new in this. When the disciples heard Jesus set out God’s expectations for marriage, they said: “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry” (Matthew 19 v 10).

A picture of God’s passionate love

The covenant of marriage is an echo of God’s covenant relationship with His people. Throughout the Bible, God’s relationship with His people is described as a marriage. “When I passed by again, I saw that you were old enough for love. So I wrapped my cloak around you to cover your nakedness and declared my marriage vows. I made a covenant with you, says the Sovereign LORD, and you became mine” (Ezekiel 16 v 8, NLT).

The unfaithfulness of God's people is described as adultery (Hosea 1 – 3). But God also promises to take His people back as His wife.

“But then I will win her back once again.

*I will lead her into the desert
and speak tenderly to her there ...*

“When that day comes,” says the LORD,

*“you will call me ‘my husband’
instead of ‘my master’ ...*

*“I will make you my wife forever,
showing you righteousness and justice,
unfailing love and compassion.*

*“I will be faithful to you and make you mine,
and you will finally know me as the LORD”*

Hosea 2 v 14, 16, 19-20 (NLT)

*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless ... “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. **Ephesians 5 v 25-27, 31-32***

In Ephesians 5, Paul quotes the words from Genesis 2 by which God first instituted marriage. But, says Paul, I'm actually talking about **Christ** and the **church**. Marriage was always intended to be a picture of Christ's relationship with His people. It's not just that God thought it was an appropriate illustration. God invented marriage, romance and sex to show us how He loves us!

- ☐ If you've experienced the joy of marriage, then you know something of the joy of companionship with God.
- ☐ If you've experienced the longing of singleness, then you know something of the need for God that we have.
- ☐ If you've experienced the pain of betrayal, then you know something of God's holy jealousy for the love of His people.
- ☐ If you've had any experience of passion, whether requited or unrequited, you know something of the passion of God for His people.

Whatever our experience, marriage and sexuality were given by God to show us the nature of His passionate love for His people.

A picture of God's covenant love

Marriage is a covenant. That's not a word we often use. Our nearest equivalent is "contract", which reminds us that our marriage vows are solemn and legally binding. But "contract" makes it sound like a cold business deal. A covenant is a contract *with love*. The Bible has a special word for it: *hesed*, which means "covenant love" or "steadfast love". It's used to describe human faithfulness, but it also describes God's covenant love for His people—a love to which He has bound Himself through His word (Hebrews 6 v 13-20). Our faithfulness in marriage is modelled on God's faithfulness to us.

The great thing about marriage is that it is a combination of binding promises and loving relationship. There is love, but there is also a wedding ring to remind the lovers of their covenant promises. For those binding promises protect the loving relationship. The promises are its context, its framework, its protection. We're not called to keep *feeling* in love; we're called to keep *being* in love—by keeping our covenant promises.

This doesn't mean love is unimportant. Listen to the Song of Songs 8 v 6-7 (ESV):

*Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm,*

*for love is strong as death,
jealousy is fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
the very flame of the LORD.
Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it.
If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house,
he would be utterly despised.*

The Song of Songs may have been a celebration of, or even a polemic for, passionate, romantic love in the context of functional marriage—at least forced arranged marriages. In 8 v 11-12 the young woman asserts that, while literal vineyards can be hired out, her “vineyard” is for her to give and cannot be bought for money.

What this means is that love can sometimes be a *choice* rather than a *feeling*. More often the feeling of being “in love” *follows* the choice to love with steadfast covenant love. That’s what happens in many, many arranged marriages. Similarly, I feel more in love than ever with my wife after over twenty years of marriage. It’s because of all we’ve shared together—good and bad—and because of thousands of choices—large and small—that my wife has made to love me. Her committed covenant love fuels my feelings of being in love.



Questions for reflection

- ❓ What do you love about your spouse?
- ❓ What do they do that gives you pleasure?
- ❓ What has your experience of marriage, singleness, love, romance or sex taught you about God’s love for His people?