

14th March 2021 10 am The Bible's Big Picture of Marriage

Service led by Andrew Attwood including interview with Simone about God in Lockdown, and Bible readings by Julie Swards. Talk by Phil Swards.

This transcript is only of the introduction to the theme, the interview and the talk.

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Prayerful Introduction to the theme

[Andrew:]

I just want to describe to you now, the basic outline of where we're going with the rest of our service. I'm going to just lead us in a prayerful time in a moment, which will then flow into two songs to help us in our worship of God. And after that, there's going to be a very brief interview with Simone Royle: I interviewed her on the topic of what God has been speaking to her through lockdown; we want to start a short series over the next weeks, where we get a sense of what God has been saying and doing with people during lockdown as perhaps a kind of a clue and a pointer as to where we might go next. So after the two songs, you'll hear Simone speaking. After that, Julie Swards is going to be reading from Scripture, and then Phil will be speaking to us again on the subject of marriage, continuing our series on biblical marriage, then we'll have opportunity to respond to that and some intercessions. And we'll bring the service to a close shortly after that with a final song. So let's have a moment of quiet and prepare our hearts to be consciously in the presence of God. Let's be still.

I just walked through our garden this morning and I found this. We've got dozens of branches and twigs in our garden surrounded by lots of trees. And I wanted to just draw your attention to the nature of the human condition. All our relationships are a little bit affected, sometimes damaged, sometimes even broken, by the way in which we relate to others, by the way in which others have done things to us, in our marriages, in our friendships, in our sense of self, in our sexuality, in all of the different ways. There is nobody who isn't in some way a little disordered and damaged: that's just the human condition. We are all disordered and damaged, and in the light of that, there is to be no judgement of others, because we are all in the same boat. As we come to God this morning, let us remember that we all need Jesus Christ as our Saviour, for every area of our life. So I just wanted to have a moment of quiet, where we can be honest with God about how we are and who we are, in all our relationships, things we have done and things that have been done to us. Let's be quiet.



Father, for the wounds that we have received because of relationships, help us and heal us. Father, for the things that we have felt or thought or done or desired that haven't fitted in with Your ways, we are sorry. Father, for the damage and the disorder that is in my life, that is in our life, we bring it all to You, Lord. We are all in the same boat, and we turn to You, Jesus as the one who saves. And so, Father, from a place of humility this morning, would You help us to praise You, to thank You and to be open to hearing from You this morning. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. so we'll sing now.

Interview with Simone: Listening to God in Lockdown

[Andrew:] Hi Simone, good to see you.

[Simone:] Hello.

[Andrew:] Thank you for being open to explore some questions with me. I wanted to ask you questions to do with hearing from God, particularly during this time of lockdown. I just wondered if lockdown has had an effect on you in terms of your openness or ability to hear from God during this time. What you think?

[Simone:] Yeah, listening to God is definitely something that I've struggled with. Prayer also historically, and over the last year I've been praying for the gift of prayer and also to be better able to listen to God and in this lockdown, because it has been a lot of silence, it's been a great time to practice it, and I've learned, I've become better, I think, listening to God, just from the practice that this lockdown time has allowed. And so now I'm better able to recognise when a thought or an idea is not for myself, it's perhaps the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

[Andrew:] Okay, right, so, because that's now become a bit more familiar to you, would you say there are any particular things or an example you could give, as something God has spoken to you during this time?

[Simone:] Yeah, definitely. So at the start of this most recent lockdown I got in a little bit of a funk, as most people I think did at that point, and I was concerned how to manage, especially trying to maintain a sort of Christian ideal of how you react emotionally to situations: the balancing act of being a parent, a teacher and a wife and a homeschooling mum as well, at this time. And I tend to get short when I'm juggling too many things. So I prayed and I said, God, "I just, I don't know how I'm going to do this, and I feel really upset and a bit panicky right now and I don't want to turn into what I could turn into under all that pressure - please help!" And I think I even said, "You are the God of the impossible!" in my prayer at that time. And immediately after I got a prompt that I should stop watching TV. It was just a thought that just appeared immediately, "Stop watching TV throughout lockdown," and it was specific, throughout the whole of lockdown.

[Andrew:] So what did you do with that? What happened?

[Simone:] Well, because this was definitely quite a clear one, like I felt it was undeniably from God, I obeyed it! I did as He said and actually I felt a tremendous relief and release that there had been a direct answer to the prayer, and it was reassuring actually, I felt full of faith that there was an answer, and that in itself took away a lot of my potential for a mental sort of meltdown at that time, because God had personally answered and given a hope of how to manage the situation.

[Andrew:] So, were there any good outcomes that came from choosing to stop watching TV so far?

[Simone:] Yes! There were so many. So I used to have TV on in the background, specifically when I was doing jobs that I found really boring like cleaning, cooking, so many jobs, and I didn't think anything of it, but it did slow me down, so I'd end up taking like three times as long to do each of those jobs. So I found from this process that I had so much more time. But not only did I have more time. Previously, when I was cooking dinner for example, I'd have the iPad on the side playing something and Paul would walk in and he'd walk out, and he'd see I was watching something and just walk out; but now, because it was off, he'd walk in, and he'd be chatting to me and I'd start chatting to him throughout dinner as well, and it became much more of a... we'd laugh, he'd help, and it just became much more of the relationship that it should be around cooking and preparing food. And also when the girls would come into the room, rather than me thinking, "Oh! they probably shouldn't see this!", me turning off the iPad or something, because they just stare at a screen as soon as it's there, so that pulled away the draw for them, they stopped seeing the screen as

going into something to do as well, and I'd end up talking to them. So we'd have conversations there. And I just found I had so much time in the day. And in addition to that, when no one walked in, I found that my mind would end up reflecting on more on the Word of God, and praying, because my mind wasn't filled up with silly programmes on TV. Instead I have more space to worship and praise, which lifts you up in the Holy Spirit, so I felt joyful.

[Andrew:] Wow, that sounds like tremendous outcome from hearing and doing what God said. So in the light of that, what would you be hoping for as a church like ours is coming out of lockdown, what would you be encouraging others to think about in the light of your experience?

[Simone:] Just the joy of obedience. It was a really unexpected outcome, and it's been really joyful, and for me I feel quite overwhelmed at the Father's love for me in answering that prayer, and you think it's such a small thing that he's told me to do, but it has really brought so much fullness of life in this time which could have been quite overwhelming. It's just one small tiny thing, but I was reflecting on it, and there's a scripture which sums it up to me, which is John 10 verse 10, and it says¹,

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came (*That's Jesus speaking*) that they may have life and have it abundantly.

And for me, I think, sometimes we don't necessarily know what the thief is in our life, but for me, clearly having the TV on the background was stealing some of that life for me. And, and turning it off gave more fullness of life. So for people to know, it's just the joy in obedience.

[Andrew:] Brilliant, thank you so much for answering my questions. Really good to hear from you, Simone. Thank you.

[Simone:] Thanks.

1st Reading: Ephesians 5:22-33

22 Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. **23** For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. **24** Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her **26** to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, **27** and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. **29** After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church – **30** for we are members of his body. **31** 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' **32** This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church. **33** However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

2nd Reading: Revelation 21:1-4

1 Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. **2** I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. **3** And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.

4 "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death" or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'

1 [ESV] and other translations

Talk: The Bible's Big Picture of Marriage

[Julie:] So now, Phil is going to bring us God's word, and I'll just pray for him as he does that.

Father God, I pray for Phil now, I pray that You will give him Your words, Holy Spirit, that everything that he says will be of You. And for those of us that are listening that our ears will be open and our hearts receptive to what You would like to say. And particularly, Lord, I pray for anyone for whom this subject series is difficult, that You will fill them with Your peace this morning. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

[Phil:] Amen.

Good morning. Thank you Julie. So, marriage, the bigger picture. Trying to tackle this reminds me a little bit of that old Monty Python sketch about the contestants in the sketch who had to summarise the works of Marcel Proust in 15 seconds. Well, I've got a bit more than 15 seconds, but it's still a big topic, so necessarily this is going to be a bit of an overview. And, Lord, may I do that in humility and obedience. When Andrew was talking a couple of weeks ago, he said, and it's worth remembering this, whenever we're exploring ethical or moral matters, when society is raising questions, we need to remember the narrative of the whole Bible. I'm going to touch on a couple of things that Andrew made in that talk as I go through. I'm also going to reference a couple of points that Graham Archer made the week before that, when we start off looking at Genesis, but I would encourage you, if you missed either of those talks, or indeed if you saw them, I'd encourage you to go back and look at them again. Graham Archer spoke on the 21st of February and Andrew on the 28th, well worth looking at again.

The Bible begins and ends with a marriage. Looking at the bigger picture of the Bible, from start to finish, we can hardly escape the fact that marriage is a major theme. Genesis 1 describes the creation of the universe, the culmination of which is the creation by God of human beings in chapter 1, verses 26-31, when for the first time His creation is not simply good, it's very good. And there are two points I'd like to make about this.

- The first one is that mankind is made in God's likeness, in the *imago dei*. We carry the image of God in us. Each person is created with the ability and the capability to have a personal, individual relationship with God. And I think there's something profound in there to say about the sanctity of human life, how we view each other as human beings in God's eyes. We should also note that we are made in God's image, by God; we're not made by ourselves in the image we choose to create for ourselves. God has designed us, male and female, for a purpose. We don't decide: it's not our place, any more than it is our place to decide subjectively what is good and what is evil. That is very definitely the province of God, the Creator of the Universe, as Adam and Eve were clearly instructed: an instruction that they ignored.
- Secondly, God makes two kinds of human, one male and one female. The Bible clearly describes humans as His image-bearers, male and female, and He blesses them. These two complimentary creatures are the ultimate level of God's creation, specifically designed to represent God together. As with the whole complimentary creation narrative, light and dark, water and dry land, etc., the male and female are designed and have purpose, in this case with each other in mind, not with themselves in mind. The purity of the Godhead, "let Us make," in verse 26, naturally creates in man and woman a plural representation, which is fulfilled in its togetherness. This makes the union of one man and one woman a very holy communion. Male and female are similar as the image-bearers of God, but with different roles within that relationship.

And the Bible text notes that God's care for Adam in Genesis 2:18, where he looks to find a suitable helper for him, the term *kenegdow* [כְּנֶגְדּוֹ] is an unusual term, it means something like equal but opposite or equal but complimentary. The union of this sacred relationship is expressed in its ultimate fulfilment, as Genesis says

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

in verse 24. This inauguration of one man and one woman becoming united as one in marriage is designed by God as His everlasting blueprint.

Now, having said the Bible starts with a marriage, there's also a separation at the start of the Bible, a separation between God and mankind described in Genesis 3, a separation which will only be healed by Jesus' death on the Cross, which uniquely shattered the penalty of sin, and is able uniquely to repair that separation. But that shapes the whole Bible narrative to come. God through the course of the Old Testament is described in the language of the faithful husband who steadfastly loves his unfaithful wife, His chosen people. But they regularly turn away from Him. This faithful love of God is an ever-present theme, taking us right back to Genesis, God's delight in the creation of mankind, His care for them even when they had turned away from Him, in Genesis 3:21 and His constant love for them. And we see this time and time again throughout the Old Testament, particularly when expressed in the prophets in Isaiah and Ezekiel and Jeremiah and Hosea. For example, Isaiah 54 verse 5 says,

For your Maker is your husband – the LORD Almighty is his name –
the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth.

And then again in Hosea chapter 1 verse 2,

Like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the LORD.

The theme is taken up in the New Testament: Jesus is described as the bridegroom. In John chapter 3 verse 29, John the Baptist describes Him as such. And then in Matthew 9:15 and Luke 5:35, Jesus describes Himself as the bridegroom. In two of His parables, He references the language of marriage. In Matthew 22 the great banquet, in which the Messianic banquet for the end of the age is described as a marriage feast, a thing which we shall see taken up in Revelation chapter 19 and chapter 21. While in Matthew 25, in the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, Jesus is again the bridegroom.

Now, I've described marriage and separation as a theme, rather than merely an image. And that's because it is more than an illustration. When we look at the Bible and what the Bible says about the sanctity of the institution of marriage, this is the closest language which we can use to describe the relationship between God and mankind. In Ephesians chapter 5, verses 22 to 33, which Julie read earlier, when Paul talks about marriage, he interlaces the relationship between husband and wife with that of the relationship between Christ and the church, culminating in the statement in verse 32,

This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church.

For me, there are many times when marriage is a profound mystery. We're trying at the moment to choose some paint for our kitchen, and Julie's thought processes are a complete mystery to me. But Paul here is talking about Christ and the church. Paul is referencing the closest language we can use to describe the relationship between God and mankind.

And then at the end of the Bible, the last image we see is the marriage of Christ, the bridegroom and the Church, the community of believers, His Bride. The marriage is announced in chapter 19 verses 6 to 9:

6 Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting:

‘Hallelujah!

For our Lord God Almighty reigns.

7 Let us rejoice and be glad

and give him glory!

For the wedding of the Lamb has come,

and his bride has made herself ready.

8 Fine linen, bright and clean,

was given her to wear.’

[...]

9 Then the angel said to me, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’

In this passage, the fine linen that the bride wears stands for the righteous acts of God's holy people. That's in stark contrast to the image of the fallen Babylon which has preceded it in chapter 18, where Babylon is portrayed as an adulteress, and the fine robes with which she is clothed in chapter 18 verse 16 are the fruits of her adultery. And then in Revelation chapter 21, the marriage takes place, as Julie read earlier on. We hear about the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

‘Look! God’s dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them.’

His marriage marks the point when God's people are finally united, or reunited, with their Saviour, their God. This event is clearly described in the language of marriage. And in chapter 22 verse 17, the happy couple, the bride and bridegroom, Jesus and His people, issue an invitation to the marriage feast, the Messianic banquet I mentioned in Matthew chapter 22. And that marriage feast is open to everyone who wishes to come and join it. The text says,

16 ‘I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.’

17 The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come!’ Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.

Everyone is invited, but as the parable of the great banquet tells us, not all choose to accept the invitation. This scene restores the relationship between God and mankind that we saw in [Genesis] chapter 1 and chapter 2. Jesus is the bridegroom. His Church is the bride, there aren't two bridegrooms here, there aren't two brides, there is one bridegroom, or husband, Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, and there is one bride, or wife, the Church, Christ's people, the redeemed, redeemed by the blood of Jesus shed on the Cross.

So marriage, holy matrimony, describes the relationship between God and mankind, and prefigures that heavenly marriage. The NIV Study Bible says marriage is a human echo of the heavenly reality. It isn't up to us to presume to change that human echo, any more than it is up to us to question the heavenly reality. Because questioning the heavenly reality, defining God's purpose, putting ourselves in God's place, that's what we do when we seek to change what God has ordained, and which is set out in His Word, His Bible.

Just to conclude, Andrew said a couple of weeks ago, the wider UK, and indeed the global population may behave as they choose. And that is between them and God, whom we shall all face on the Last Day. But it is critical that we who know Christ as our Lord and Saviour, we who have committed to follow Him, we who are

called to be holy, as it says in 1 Peter 1, "'Be holy for I am holy', says the Lord," it is critical that we are witnesses to His saving love, His purposes, and His design for us and for all mankind. On the topic of marriage, and many others, He has given us His Word, and we are called to follow it.

Prayerful Reflection

[Andrew:]

Amen. Thank you Phil, thank you very much for that. So let's have a moment of quiet to be responsive to the words that Phil has given us. Let's be quiet.

And perhaps in the quiet, particularly meditate on Christ as the bridegroom and the Church as His bride.

Father God, this big story of Scripture reveals to us that You have always wanted to be married to humanity, to those who believe, to be the bridegroom to us, Your chosen people, the bride. This is in Your heart's desire, Father God, shown to us in Jesus. Father, we receive this image again, we receive this story again. Father, we thank You for this deep, deep commitment to human beings.

Father, would You help us to hold in our hearts the whole story, including the good beginnings, where You set things out as they should be, and including that awareness of brokenness that happens, all that time ago, but also in our own lives. Lord, just in a moment of quiet we recognise the fracture and the brokenness in the world and in our hearts.

And Father God, would You pour out healing on our thinking. Lord, where we may have misunderstood or even distorted the story, would You heal our minds, straighten our minds, correct our thinking, to fall in line with Your good story, Jesus as the bridegroom and the Church as His bride.

And Father, I want to pray now a blessing on all relationships that are pictures and echoes of Your goodness in the world, Lord, for those who are married and for those who are single. Father God, we thank You that Jesus Himself is an exemplar, a brilliant example of what single life looks like: a beautiful example to us of singleness being an honoured way to live. Thank you for Jesus' example. We also thank You, Lord, for the privilege for those of us who are married, of being image-bearers, as husband and wife. We thank You, Lord, that this reflects something of what God is like, and what it is between Christ and the Church. Thank you for the privilege of helping us be image-bearers in that particular way. And we pray, Lord, whether we are single or whether we are married, that we would work hard at reflecting You well: Your goodness and Your love and Your truth.

Just again a moment of quiet, where we can align our hearts with God's big story, and the call to reflect God well.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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