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TIMOTHY KELLER

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VIII

The Obedient Master



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VIII

Timothy Keller



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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

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The Obedient Master

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About the Author

In the first five essays in this series, we studied examples of men and women who had life-changing encounters with Jesus Christ in the flesh—encounters that decisively answered the big questions of life for them. But how can we encounter Jesus as those in the New Testament Gospels did? How can we experience the same effect? Those same Gospels give us the answer. They show us that Jesus was not merely a great teacher and healer but someone who came to rescue us from evil and sin. He did this through his temptations and sufferings, through his death and resurrection. In this second set of essays, we are looking at these events.

Often Jesus' time in the garden of Gethsemane before his death is seen as an interesting and convicting example of the weakness of his disciples, who are even at that moment clueless about what Jesus is about to undergo. But Jesus' experience in that dark place was not really an interlude between events of higher and more significant dramatic action. Something happened there that begs for a deeper explanation. There is perhaps nowhere else in the Bible where we get a more penetrating look at Jesus' own inner life and motivation and what he experienced at the end of his life. This scene may throw more light on why and how he died, and how we should respond to it, than any other part of the Gospel accounts—including the crucifixion narratives.

To get the full picture of what happened we should look at the accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Here is the beginning of the scene, according to Matthew:

> Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." (Matthew 26:36–38)

First I want to examine the magnitude of the pain Christ experienced here.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke each find a way to tell us that Jesus' grief and sorrow were enormous, well beyond even what we would expect at such a moment. Matthew records Jesus' words "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." He was saying, "I am experiencing an internal and mental agony and pain that is so great, I feel I am about to die." It was so unbearable that he felt like the pain alone could kill him right then and there.

Now Jesus is called "the Man of Sorrows." Throughout his life we see him weeping and sighing much more than we see him exulting. But this burden is something far greater. Matthew indicates that as Jesus was walking away from the larger group of disciples with Peter, James, and John toward the garden for prayer, "he *began* [emphasis mine] to be sorrowful and troubled" (Matthew 26:37). This change happens as he is en route—it almost seems to descend upon him in real time. Not only was this mental agony so enormous that he thought he was going to die, but according to Mark he was astounded by it. Mark uses the Greek word *ekthambeisthai*, which means to be moved to an "intense emotional state because of something causing great surprise or perplexity."[1] Some English translations mute the meaning of this term and just translate it as "deeply distressed" (as in the New International Version). I wonder if that is because we have a feeling that if Jesus really is who he says he is—the infinitely preexistent Son of God come to earth—he couldn't be thunderstruck by anything. How could the Second Person of the Trinity, who even in his human form seems to anticipate every eventuality, be shocked? But he is. He's reeling, dumbfounded, astonished. As he is on his way to pray, a darkness and horror comes down on him beyond anything he could have anticipated, and the pain of it makes him feel he is disintegrating on the spot.

Remember that all the Gospel writers knew by the time they wrote their accounts that many of Jesus' own followers were able to face death with remarkable serenity. Luke records that when the Christian leader Stephen faced his executioners, his radiant "face was like the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15), and as they stoned him to death he gently prayed for their forgiveness (Acts 7:60). Early Christian writers such as Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp pointed to the poise with which Christians faced torture and death. One historian writes that this was one of the ways that Christian thinkers attempted to recommend their faith to the pagan population. They argued that Christians suffered and died better than pagans.[2] Christians went to the lions singing hymns; they went into the flames with their hands raised in prayer.

But Jesus Christ is facing death in a way that his followers did not. His face

is not as radiant as the face of an angel. He is not calm or poised or at peace. And certainly this must have really happened. If Matthew, Mark, and Luke were making up or even just embellishing the life of the founder of their faith, would they depict him struggling more desperately before his imminent death than most of his followers?

What is the reason, then, for the magnitude of Jesus' agony and horror before his death? The answer is, this was a different death than anybody else ever faced before or since.

Here is the next part of Matthew's account:

> Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."
>
> Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."
>
> He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."
>
> When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing. (Matthew 26:39–44)

Luke adds this telling phrase: "And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22:44).

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all mention "the cup" as the heart of Jesus' prayer that night. The cup, in ancient times, was like the electric chair. Remember how Socrates was executed—he drank a cup of poison. "The cup" did not represent just any kind of death in general but rather a judicial death in particular. The apostles' use of the term means that Jesus knows he is going to be executed. But it means even more than that.

In the Bible "the cup" does not refer so much to a civil penalty as to God's own judicial wrath on injustice and evildoing. Ezekiel 23 says, "You will drink . . . the cup of ruin and desolation . . . and you will tear your breasts," and Isaiah 51 speaks of those who drink "the cup of his wrath . . . the bowl of

staggering." The reason that Jesus Christ did not die as gracefully as later Christian martyrs is because none of them were facing the cup. When Jesus himself speaks of "the cup," it shows he knows that he is facing not just physical torture and death; he is about to experience the full divine wrath on the evil and sin of all humanity. The judicial wrath of God is about to come down upon him rather than upon us.

And while this outpouring of wrath struck with full force on the cross the next day—where Jesus cried out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—I agree with the commentators who believe that he was beginning to get his first actual experiential foretaste of it here in the garden. What would that judicial wrath feel like? It is the torture of divine absence.

2 Thessalonians 1:8 reads: "He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus." The judgment of God in the Bible is unbelievably fair. It is an utterly natural consequence. The essence of sin is "I do not want to have God in my life." And the heart of God's judgment is to give us what we have asked for. There truly is nothing fairer than that—and nothing more terrible. According to the Bible we are all built for God, made to enjoy his presence and a relationship with him. Here on earth, even those of us who disbelieve and flee from God are not completely cut off from him. St. Paul says that in God "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Paul was speaking to Greek philosophers at the time, people who didn't believe in God. He meant that even though we may not acknowledge the God of the Bible, he is still upholding our lives in ways we cannot see. And what would happen if God were to truly remove his gracious, sustaining power from our lives? It would be a kind of spiritual agony and disintegration that would go on forever, since our souls are built for his love and presence. It would be eternal torment and perfectly just. As C. S. Lewis says in *The Great Divorce*, if in this life you never say to God, "Thy will be done," then eventually God will say to you for the afterlife, "All right, then *thy* will be done." If you want freedom from God, you will quite justly get what you hope for. And it will be torment.

Now think back to Jesus Christ in the garden. As a human being on earth, God sustained his sentient human existence, and Jesus had access to the joy of God's presence in regular prayer and communion with the Father. Yet unlike any other human being, he would have shared the perfect intensity of the love of God. He would have known the infinite bliss of full fellowship with the Father. But as he was walking into the garden, he would have started to pray, and suddenly—for the first time in all of eternity—he would find the lines of

communication severed. This is what Bill Lane, who has written a commentary on Mark, says about the garden (emphasis mine):

> That dreadful sorrow and anxiety then, out of which the prayer for the passing of the cups brings, is not an expression of fear before a dark destiny, nor a shrinking from the prospect of physical suffering and death. It is rather *the horror of one who lives wholly for the Father at the prospect of the alienation from God which is entailed in the judgment upon sin which Jesus assumes.* . . . Jesus came to be with the Father . . . before his betrayal, but hell rather than heaven opened before him, and he staggered.[3]

Remember what Ezekiel and Isaiah said. The cup of God's wrath is like a poison that makes the body stagger and burn with inner pain. That is what is beginning to happen to Jesus. He begins to pray and he suddenly sees into the abyss. No Father, no presence, no communion; Hell rather than Heaven opens to his gaze. And the only way to understand the infinite magnitude of his sufferings is realize that he is the Son of God. If I were to lose the love of a friend, that would be painful. If I were to lose the love of my children or my wife, that would be infinitely more painful. The longer, deeper, and more intimate the love relationship, the more searing the pain when it is severed. But the Son's perfect love relationship with the Father is as far beyond my love relationship with my wife as an ocean is beyond a dewdrop. And this is what he was losing.

Yet Jesus' predicament was worse than even that, for he began to experience not merely the absence of love but the presence of wrath. And just as divine love is immeasurably beyond human love, so the experience of divine wrath must be beyond human anger. God is omnipotent—infinitely powerful. How can we imagine what it would be like for a mountain of divine wrath to come down on us? How much does omnipotence weigh?

Luke's Gospel says that Jesus was literally "in agony" (in Greek, *agonia*—translated in the NIV as "anguish") and adds that as he prayed his profuse sweat was "like drops of blood." It is possible that this means that blood was in his sweat—since people in great shock can burst capillaries near the surface of their skin, causing blood to seep out with their perspiration. Or it may mean that the rivers of sweat were like the blood that would soon be pouring out and running down his body. Either way, he is in extremity. He is beginning to experience the absence of the Father and the incredible agony of being cut off from God—such

that he falls to the ground and begs, “Don’t let this happen.”

So why the magnitude of the agony? Because Jesus Christ was not simply dying as any other person would die. He was in perfect communion with the Father and was losing that communion on our account. And as our substitute, he was receiving the judicial wrath of God. Jonathan Edwards summarized it like this: “The conflict in Christ’s soul, in this view of his last sufferings, was dreadful, beyond all expression or conception.”

I also want to look at the timing of Jesus’ agony. With the help of theologians like William Lane and Jonathan Edwards, I’ve argued that Jesus was getting a foretaste of the divine wrath here in the garden. But why is it particularly important that he experiences that foretaste so greatly now, before the moment of the Crucifixion? The answer gets at a part of Christian doctrine that is often overlooked or misunderstood but is deeply consoling.

Theologians over the years have made a distinction between the passive and active aspects of Christ’s work. It is taught that in his passive obedience, Jesus took the penalty we deserved; he died the death we should have died. But in his active obedience, he lived the life we should have lived.[4] This may sound esoteric, but it is actually profoundly practical.

When Jesus went to the cross, he took upon himself the punishment for sins that we deserve and that he didn’t. That is what has historically been called his “passive” work: He received the penalty for our disobedience to God’s law. As a result, we who believe in Jesus are free from any condemnation for those sins. But if this was all he had done for us, we might be grateful that we will not be punished for things we have done in the past. We might be supremely relieved that God won’t be angry with us anymore. But we still wouldn’t have evidence that he actually loves us, for just because a father is not punishing his son doesn’t mean he’s delighted with him. And so if you believed only in Jesus’ passive work, you might still feel under a great deal of pressure and fear that you were not truly “right with God” and could still lose God’s favor if you slipped up. You certainly could not be assured that you were loved.

But passively absorbing punishment is not all Jesus did for us. During his entire life, and preeminently here at his death, he also fulfilled the positive demands of the law of God as well, which has been called his “active” work. Jesus not only died the death we should have died in order to take the law’s curse for us, he also lived the great life of love and fidelity we should have lived in order to earn God’s blessing for us. No one ever loved God with his entire soul, mind and strength—no one ever loved his neighbor with perfect, full, sacrificial

love—except Jesus. What does a life like that deserve? It deserves God's highest blessing, praise, and honor. It deserves God's full love and delight. And because Jesus not only fulfilled the law of God passively but actively—in our place, as our substitute—it means not only that he got the penalty we deserved, we get the reward from God that he deserved. It's an astonishingly *thorough* salvation, with grace piled on top of grace.

What does this have to do with Jesus' struggles in the garden of Gethsemane? Everything.

It is one thing to know something cognitively in the abstract and quite another thing to know it with one's whole being. We may know in our minds that the experience in the dentist's chair will hurt, but we make the appointment and we jump into the chair with a nervous joke. But as soon as the drilling begins we say to ourselves, "If I had known it was going to be like this, I would never have come. It's not worth it." Now what if somehow while you were still at home deciding to schedule the appointment you could have, for a minute or two, a foretaste of what the actual pain would be like? If that were possible, most of the world's dentists would be out of business.

Up until now, Jesus certainly *knew* what was to come. He had been constantly telling his disciples he had come to suffer and die. But his astonishment as he entered the garden reveals that only then was he existentially grasping what he was about to endure. The next day out in public he would be nailed to the cross, and at that point there would be no escaping his fate. But here in the dark, with the disciples asleep, when Jesus could very easily slip away, the Father lets him know what he is in for. As Jonathan Edwards says in his "Christ's Agony" sermon, "It was the first time that Christ had a full view of the difficulty of this command; which appeared so great as to cause that bloody sweat." And so, when he goes to the cross for us after this experience in the garden, he goes with vivid firsthand knowledge of what will happen. And that makes Jesus' action the greatest act of love to the Father—and to his fellow human beings—in the history of the world. No one ever faced suffering like this in order to love, and so no one ever loved like this. Edwards continues:

> The agony of Jesus Christ was caused by a vivid, bright, full, immediate view of the wrath of God. God the Father, as it were, set the cup down before him, which was vastly more terrible than Nebuchadnezzar's furnace. He now had a near view of the furnace into which he was about to be cast. He stood and viewed the raging flames and the glowings of its

> heat that he might know where he was going and what he was about to suffer. He felt what Ezekiel said, "You shall drink the cup of ruin and desolation and tear your breasts." He felt what Isaiah said, that you will "drink the cup of his wrath . . . the bowl of staggering." Christ was going to be cast into a dreadful furnace of wrath and it was not proper that he should plunge himself into it blindfold as not knowing how dreadful the furnace was. Therefore God brought him and set him at the mouth of the furnace that he might look in and stand and view its fierce and raging flames and might see where he was going and might voluntarily enter into it and bear it for us, knowing what it was. If Jesus Christ did not full know before he took it, and drunk it, it would not properly have been his own act as a human being. But when he took that cup knowing what he did, so was his love to us infinitely more wonderful and his obedience to God infinitely more perfect.

God set the cup in front of Jesus, as it were, and let him smell it and taste it when it was still possible for Jesus to pull away and protect himself. And that means that, in effect, the Father was saying, "Here's the cup that you are about to drink. Here is the furnace into which you are about to be cast. See these friends of yours sleeping over there? If they are to be saved, there is no other way. Either they perish, or you perish. See how terrible the heat is, see what pain and anguish you must endure. Is your love for them and for me so great that you will go on and take it?"

And Edwards imagines that Jesus could have looked at his disciples, who could not even stay awake to support him in the hour of his greatest need, and said with complete justice and warrant:

> Why should I, who have been living from all eternity in the enjoyment of the Father's love, go to cast myself into such a furnace for them that never can requite me for it? Why should I yield myself to be thus crushed by the weight of divine wrath, for them who have no love to me, and are my enemies? They do not deserve any union with me, and never did, and never will do any thing to recommend themselves to me.

He *could* rightly have said this—but he didn't. That was not the language of his heart. Instead he said to God, "Thy will be done." Edwards concludes: "His sorrows abounded, but his love did much more abound. Christ's soul was

overwhelmed with a deluge of grief, but this was from a deluge of love to sinners in his heart sufficient to overflow the world, and overwhelm the highest mountains of its sins. Those great drops of blood that fell down to the ground were a manifestation of an ocean of love in Christ's heart."

But, as we have been saying, it is not enough to say this was only the greatest act of love in history, it was also the most astounding, perfect act of obedience to God. At the beginning of history there was also a garden and a command. God put Adam and Eve in that garden, and they were told not to eat of the Tree. The direction was: "Obey me about the Tree, and you will live"—obey me and I'll bless you. But they disobeyed. Now there is another garden, and a Second Adam,[5] and another command. Jesus Christ has been sent by the Father to go to the cross, which is also a tree.[6]

Now the command of God to Adam was the prototype for all his commands to everyone. God always says, in one way or another, "Obey me and I will bless you; I will be with you." But here is the exception. Only once did he say to a human being what he says to Jesus. To the first Adam he says, "Obey me about the Tree and I will bless you"—and he didn't do it. But to the second Adam he says, "Obey me about the Tree and I will crush you to powder"—and Jesus did. Jesus is the first and last person in history who ever was told that obedience would nonetheless bring a curse. The Father is saying, essentially, "If you obey me, if you are faithful to me, I will forsake you, cast you off and send your soul into hell." And yet Jesus obeyed. Even as he was dying, abandoned by his Father, he called him, "My God"—words that in the Bible were covenant language, conveying intimacy. Even though he was being forsaken, Jesus was still obeying. The poet George Herbert, again referring to the cross as a tree, puts beautifully how the disobedience of the first Adam was put right only through the far more difficult and greater obedience of the Second. Herbert imagines Jesus speaking from the cross, saying:

O all ye who passe by, behold and see;
Man stole the fruit, but I must climb the tree;
The tree of life to all, but onely me:
Was ever grief like mine?

And now return to that seemingly esoteric teaching about the passive and active obedience of Christ. If Jesus had died only the death I should have died,

then if I wanted to be sure that the Father not only pardoned me but loved me deeply and fully, I would rightly feel it was up to me to live a morally heroic life. My sins would be forgiven, but God's positive regard of me otherwise would be completely dependent on how well I was living.

But remember that Jesus did not just die the death we should have died; he lived the life we should have lived. As one old Scottish minister, Robert Murray M'Cheyne, used to say, he is not just a dying savior, he is a doing savior. When we believe in him, we do not just get the benefits of his death. It is not just that our sins are forgiven, but we also get the benefits of his obedience. That means his righteousness is credited to us (theologians use the financial term "imputed"), as well as his sacrifice. In 2 Corinthians 5:21, it says: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him." When we believe in Jesus Christ, we are seen as righteous. We are seen as obeying. We are seen to be doing as well as Jesus did, not just dying as well as Jesus died.

And look at the beauty, the power of what Jesus did! What kind of honor does this kind of valor, this level of love and sacrifice deserve? That's the honor that comes to you when you believe in Christ. On a TV detective show some years ago I saw a story of an old man in his eighties, an ex-Marine, sadly broken down and accused of a crime. Two big, strapping military police and a snarling Navy lawyer come to arrest him. They are speaking brusquely and barking orders when suddenly one of the old man's friends reaches over and pulls away his tie. There is revealed the Congressional Medal of Honor, which he had won decades before at Iwo Jima. At the sight of that medal the lawyer and the MPs snap suddenly to attention. They are not saluting him personally, of course. In himself he might be a criminal and in many other ways is certainly a failure. But for the sake of the medal—which represented not only his sacrificial deeds but the valor of hundreds of others in military service over the centuries—he was treated with honor. That's just a partial hint of what happens to us in light of Christ's active obedience. We are not like prisoners who are freed and given bus fare downtown from the prison. No, we are like prisoners who are freed and then draped with the Medal of Honor, with all the rights and benefits that would come with it. We are not just given pardon and freedom but love and delight. That's the active obedience of Jesus at work. And though he has been obeying God by living a perfect life throughout, his active obedience faces a monumental challenge here in the garden. That's why it's so important that we see the beauty of his response to that challenge, before he has passed the point of no return.

Now, what difference does all this make for us? How does it help us, to see Jesus suffer something we will never experience?

First, Jesus in the garden is an unparalleled model of integrity. In the dark, with nobody looking, knowing that he is called to do the hardest thing anyone has ever done, Jesus still does the right thing. He does the same thing in the dark and in private that the next day he will do in full view. Let me ask you—are you the same person in the dark as you are in the light? Are you the same in private as you are in public? Or are you living a double life?

Second, this is not only a great model for integrity, it is a great model for prayer. The most astounding thing about Jesus is that he is, at the same moment, both brutally honest about his feelings and desires and yet absolutely submitted to the will of God. He is honest—he doesn't put on a pious front. Three times the Son of God tells the Father he'd prefer to avoid the plan of salvation, saying, "I don't want to do this." There is no cover-up. And yet at the same time he says, without hesitating, "Not my will, but thy will be done." The basic purpose of prayer is not to bend God's will to mine but to mold my will into his. Jesus is so God-centered and yet so human and honest at once. Let this be your guide for prayer. You must neither repress your feelings nor be ruled by them. Most people do one or the other, but not both.

Third, in the garden we have a tremendous example of patience with people. In Matthew's account he comes back to his disciples at one point and says, "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" (Matthew 26:40). Here is a man under the most crushing weight asking his friends for a little support and finding that they have gone to sleep on him. He has been completely let down, but what does he say? Matthew records Jesus' words: "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41). Isn't that remarkable? He is giving them some credit. He says, "You let me down, but I know you mean well." In the depths of his agony he can still find something affirming to say to his friends. There are about twenty things wrong with the disciples' performance that night, but he finds the one or two things that are right and points them out. "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (John 13:1).

So Jesus is a great model of how to live, pray, and relate to people. But if Jesus is *only* a model for us, then he is no encouragement—for he is too good. No one could live up to his standard. But Jesus came not just to be a model but a Savior. He changes us on the inside so that we can be slowly but surely made over into his image. He does not just tell us how to live; he gives us the power to

live that way.

How? Look at him here in the garden, doing all this not just as an example but as a substitute, in your place. Knowing that makes his suffering personal—to you. It can give you a new ability to face your own trials, to rid yourself of crippling self-pity and lack of resolve. Think of God, swirling the cup right under Jesus' nose, saying, "Are you really going to do that for these people?" And Jesus says, "Yes." Whenever you are feeling sorry for yourself, "Oh my, what a cup I am drinking," you can say to yourself, "Oh, but it is *nothing* like his cup! What I am going through is nothing compared to what he did." And so you can pray something like this: "Lord, you were patient in your infinite suffering for me. I can certainly be patient in this much smaller suffering for you."

The teaching of Christ's active obedience also transforms your self-regard and makes a new ballast and poise available to you. Jesus not only pardoned you; he also pinned his "Medal of Honor" on you. When you believe in him you are not just forgiven but beautiful to God, righteous in Him. Now how do you deal with criticism or failure? We should not look at who we are in ourselves but at who we are in him. Oftentimes after we screw up, we realize upon reflection that we were trying to save face, scrambling for reputation or approval. In other words, we try to prove ourselves, make ourselves beautiful, significant, and righteous—though we wouldn't use those terms. We are trying to make ourselves feel like something important and something decent, instead of letting Jesus carry the burden of significance. If we really understood how God regards us in Christ we could take disapproval and failure in stride.

But there is the third thing that this passage gives us. I know people who have said: "I would follow Christ, but I do not think I can keep it up. I do not trust myself. I think he'd get tired of my failures." Please look at him in the garden. Look what his love for you has already enabled him to endure for you. If he had turned away from suffering and the cross, we would have been lost, but he didn't do that. Hell came down on him, and he would not let go of us. His love for us has already taken everything that the universe could throw at it and it held fast—and you think that you are somehow going to upset him? Is Jesus going to look at you and say, "Well, that does it! Infinite existential torment was one thing, but I can only take so much!"?

If this suffering did not make him give up on us, nothing will. So Paul can essentially say, "Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ" (Romans 8:38–39). The Lord says, "I will never leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5).

This is the love you have been looking for all of your life. This is the only love that can't let you down. This is bombproof love. Not friend-love, not personal acclaim, not married love, and not even romantic love—it is this love that you are after, underneath all your pursuit of those others. And if this love of active obedience is an active reality in your life, you will be a person of integrity; you will be a person of prayer; you will be kind to people who mistreat you. If you have this love you will be a little more like him. Look at him dying in the dark for you. Let it melt you into his likeness.

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ONE

THE SECRET OF MARRIAGE

> *A man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery. . . .*
>
> Ephesians 5:31–32

I'm tired of listening to sentimental talks on marriage. At weddings, in church, and in Sunday school, much of what I've heard on the subject has as much depth as a Hallmark card. While marriage is many things, it is anything *but* sentimental. Marriage is glorious but hard. It's a burning joy and strength, and yet it is also blood, sweat, and tears, humbling defeats and exhausting victories. No marriage I know more than a few weeks old could be described as a fairy tale come true. Therefore, it is not surprising that the only phrase in Paul's famous discourse on marriage in Ephesians 5 that many couples can relate to is verse 32, printed above. Sometimes you fall into bed, after a long, hard day of trying to understand each other, and you can only sigh: "This is all a profound mystery!" At times, your marriage seems to be an unsolvable puzzle, a maze in which you feel lost.

I believe all this, and yet there's no relationship between human beings that is greater or more important than marriage. In the Bible's account, God himself officiates at the first wedding (Genesis 2:22–25). And when the man sees the woman, he breaks into poetry and exclaims, "At last!"[7] Everything in the text proclaims that marriage, next to our relationship to God, is the most profound relationship there is. And that is why, like knowing God himself, coming to know and love your spouse is difficult and painful yet rewarding and wondrous.

The most painful, the most wonderful—this is the Biblical understanding of marriage, and there has never been a more important time to lift it up and give it

prominence in our culture.

The Decline of Marriage

Over the last forty years, the "leading marriage indicators"—empirical descriptions of marriage health and satisfaction in the United States—have been in steady decline.[8] The divorce rate is nearly twice the rate it was in 1960.[9] In 1970, 89 percent of all births were to married parents, but today only 60 percent are.[10] Most tellingly, over 72 percent of American adults were married in 1960, but only 50 percent were in 2008.[11]

All of this shows an increasing wariness and pessimism about marriage in our culture, and this is especially true of younger adults. They believe their chances of having a good marriage are not great, and, even if a marriage is stable, there is in their view the horrifying prospect that it will become sexually boring. As comedian Chris Rock has asked, "Do you want to be single and lonely or married and bored?" Many young adults believe that these are indeed the two main options. That is why many aim for something in the middle between marriage and mere sexual encounters—cohabitation with a sexual partner.

This practice has grown exponentially in the last three decades. Today more than half of all people live together before getting married. In 1960, virtually no one did.[12] One quarter of all unmarried women between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-nine are currently living with a partner, and by their late thirties over 60 percent will have done so.[13] Driving this practice are several widespread beliefs. One is the assumption that most marriages are unhappy. After all, the reasoning goes, 50 percent of all marriages end in divorce, and surely many of the other 50 percent must be miserable. Living together before marriage, many argue, improves your chances of making a good marriage choice. It helps you discover whether you are compatible before you take the plunge. It's a way to discover if the other person can really keep your interest, if the "chemistry" is strong enough. "Everyone I know who's gotten married quickly—and failed to live together [first]—has gotten divorced," said one man in a Gallup survey for the National Marriage Project.[14]

The problem with these beliefs and assumptions, however, is that every one of them is almost completely wrong.

The Surprising Goodness of Marriage

Despite the claim of the young man in the Gallup survey, "a substantial body of evidence indicates that those who live together before marriage are more likely to break up after marriage."[15] Cohabitation is an understandable response from those who experienced their own parents' painful divorces, but the facts indicate that the cure may be worse than the alleged disease.[16]

Other common assumptions are wrong as well. While it is true that some 45 percent of marriages end in divorce, by far the greatest percentage of divorces happen to those who marry before the age of eighteen, who have dropped out of high school, and who have had a baby together before marrying. "So if you are a reasonably well-educated person with a decent income, come from an intact family and are religious, and marry after twenty-five without having a baby first, your chances of divorce are low indeed."[17]

Many young adults argue for cohabitation because they feel they should own a home and be financially secure before they marry.[18] The assumption is that marriage is a financial drain. But studies point to what have been called "The Surprising Economic Benefits of Marriage."[19] A 1992 study of retirement data shows that individuals who were continuously married had 75 percent more wealth at retirement than those who never married or who divorced and did not remarry. Even more remarkably, married men have been shown to earn 10–40 percent more than do single men with similar education and job histories.

Why would this be? Some of this is because married people experience greater physical and mental health. Also, marriage provides a profound "shock absorber" that helps you navigate disappointments, illnesses, and other difficulties. You recover your equilibrium faster. But the increased earnings probably also come from what scholars call "marital social norms." Studies show that spouses hold one another to greater levels of personal responsibility and self-discipline than friends or other family members can. Just to give one example, single people can spend money unwisely and self-indulgently without anyone to hold them accountable. But married people make each other practice saving, investment, and delayed gratification. Nothing can mature character like marriage.[20]

Perhaps the main reason that young adults are wary of marriage is their perception that most couples are unhappy in their marriages. Typical is a Yahoo! Forum in which a twenty-four-year-old male announced his decision to never marry. He reported that as he had shared his decision over the past few months to

his married friends, everyone laughed and acted jealous. They all said to him that he was smart. He concluded that at least 70 percent of married people must be unhappy in their relationships. A young woman in a response to his post agreed with his anecdotal evidence. That fit her own assessment of her married friends. “Out of 10 married couples . . . 7 are miserable as hell,” she opined, and added, “I’m getting married next year because I love my fiancé. However, if things change, I won’t hesitate to divorce him.”[21]

Recently the *New York Times Magazine* ran an article about a new movie called *Monogamy* by Dana Adam Shapiro.[22] In 2008, Shapiro came to realize that many of his married thirty-something friends were breaking up. In preparation for making a film about it, he decided to do an oral history of breaking up—collecting fifty in-depth interviews with people who had seen their marriages dissolve. He did no research, however, on happy, long-term marriages. When asked why he did not do that, he paraphrased Tolstoy: “All happy couples are the same. Which is to say they’re just boring.”[23] “So it will not be surprising,” the *Times* reporter concluded, “to say that the film, in the end, takes a grim, if not entirely apocalyptic, view of relationships.” The movie depicts two people who love each other very much but who simply “can’t make it work.” In other interviews about the movie, the filmmaker expresses his belief that it is extraordinarily hard though not completely impossible for two modern persons to love each other without stifling one another’s individuality and freedom. In the reporter’s words, the never-married Shapiro, though he hopes to be married someday and does not believe his film is anti-marriage, finds an “intractable difficulty” with monogamy. In this he reflects the typical view of young adults, especially in the more urban areas of the United States.

As the pastor of a church containing several thousand single people in Manhattan, I have talked to countless men and women who have the same negative perceptions about marriage. However, they underestimate the prospects for a good marriage. All surveys tell us that the number of married people who say they are “*very* happy” in their marriages is high—about 61–62 percent—and there has been little decrease in this figure during the last decade. Most striking of all, longitudinal studies demonstrate that two-thirds of those unhappy marriages out there will become happy within five years if people stay married and do not get divorced.[24] This led University of Chicago sociologist Linda J. Waite to say, “the benefits of divorce have been oversold.”[25]

During the last two decades, the great preponderance of research evidence

shows that people who are married consistently show much higher degrees of satisfaction with their lives than those who are single, divorced, or living with a partner.[26] It also reveals that most people are happy in their marriages, and most of those who are not and who don't get divorced eventually become happy. Also, children who grow up in married, two-parent families have two to three times more positive life outcomes than those who do not.[27] The overwhelming verdict, then, is that being married and growing up with parents who are married are enormous boosts to our well-being.

The History of Marriage

Belief in the desirability and goodness of marriage was once universal, but that is no longer true. A recent report by the University of Virginia's National Marriage Project concluded the following: "Less than a third of the [high school senior] girls and only slightly more than a third of the boys seem to believe . . . that marriage is more beneficial to individuals than the alternatives. Yet this negative attitude is contrary to the available empirical evidence, which consistently indicates the substantial personal as well as social benefits of being married compared to staying single or just living with someone."[28] The report argues that the views of most young adults not only are unsupported by the older consensus, and against the teaching of all the major religions of the world, but they are also unsupported by the accumulated evidence of the most recent social science.

So where did this pessimism come from, and why is it so out of touch with reality? Paradoxically, it may be that the pessimism comes from a new kind of unrealistic idealism about marriage, born of a significant shift in our culture's understanding of the purpose of marriage. Legal scholar John Witte, Jr., says that the earlier "ideal of marriage as a permanent contractual union designed for the sake of mutual love, procreation, and protection is slowly giving way to a new reality of marriage as a 'terminal sexual contract' designed for the gratification of the individual parties."[29]

Witte points out that in Western civilizations there have been several competing views of what the "form and function" of marriage should be.[30] The first two were the Catholic and the Protestant perspectives. Though different in many particulars, they both taught that the purpose of marriage was to create a framework for lifelong devotion and love between a husband and a wife. It was a

solemn bond, designed to help each party subordinate individual impulses and interests in favor of the relationship, to be a sacrament of God's love (the Catholic emphasis) and serve the common good (the Protestant emphasis). Protestants understood marriage to be given by God not merely to Christians but to benefit the entirety of humanity. Marriage created character by bringing male and female into a binding partnership. In particular, lifelong marriage was seen as creating the only kind of social stability in which children could grow and thrive. The reason that society had a vested interest in the institution of marriage was because children could not flourish as well in any other kind of environment.[31]

However, Witte explains that a new view of marriage emerged from the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Enlightenment. Older cultures taught their members to find meaning in duty, by embracing their assigned social roles and carrying them out faithfully. During the Enlightenment, things began to shift. The meaning of life came to be seen as the fruit of the freedom of the individual to choose the life that most fulfills him or her personally. Instead of finding meaning through self-denial, through giving up one's freedoms, and binding oneself to the duties of marriage and family, marriage was redefined as finding emotional and sexual fulfillment and self-actualization.

Proponents of this new approach did not see the essence of marriage as located in either its divine sacramental symbolism or as a social bond given to benefit the broader human commonwealth. Rather, marriage was seen as a contract between two parties for mutual individual growth and satisfaction. In this view, married persons married for themselves, not to fulfill responsibilities to God or society. Parties should, therefore, be allowed to conduct their marriage in any way they deemed beneficial to them, and no obligation to church, tradition, or broader community should be imposed on them. In short, the Enlightenment privatized marriage, taking it out of the public sphere, and redefined its purpose as individual gratification, not any "broader good" such as reflecting God's nature, producing character, or raising children. Slowly but surely, this newer understanding of the meaning of marriage has displaced the older ones in Western culture.

This change has been a very self-conscious one. Recently, *New York Times* columnist Tara Parker-Pope wrote an article entitled "The Happy Marriage Is the 'Me' Marriage":

> The notion that the best marriages are those that bring satisfaction to

> the individual may seem counterintuitive. After all, isn't marriage supposed to be about putting the relationship first? Not anymore. For centuries, marriage was viewed as an economic and social institution, and the emotional and intellectual needs of the spouses were secondary to the survival of the marriage itself. But in modern relationships, people are looking for a partnership, and they want partners who make their lives more interesting . . . [who] help each of them attain valued goals.[32]

This change has been revolutionary, and Parker-Pope lays it out unashamedly. Marriage used to be a public institution for the common good, and now it is a private arrangement for the satisfaction of the individuals. Marriage used to be about *us*, but now it is about *me*.

But ironically, this newer view of marriage actually puts a crushing burden of expectation on marriage and on spouses in a way that more traditional understandings never did. And it leaves us desperately trapped between both unrealistic longings for *and* terrible fears about marriage.

The Search for a Compatible "Soul Mate"

A clear picture of this expectation can be found in a significant study from 2002 by the National Marriage Project entitled "Why Men Won't Commit," by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe.[33] Men are often accused by women of being "commitment-phobic," afraid of marriage. The authors of the report respond that, indeed, "Our investigation of male attitudes indicates there is evidence to support this popular view." They go on to list the reasons that men give for why they would rather not get married, or at least not soon. Most striking, however, is how many men said they wouldn't marry until they found the "perfect soul mate," someone very "compatible." But what does that mean?

When I met my future wife, Kathy, we sensed very quickly that we shared an unusual number of books, stories, themes, ways of thinking about life, and experiences that brought us joy. We recognized in one another a true "kindred spirit" and the potential for a bond of deep friendship. But this is not what many young adults mean when they speak of a compatible soul mate. According to Whitehead and Popenoe, there were two key factors.

The first is physical attractiveness and sexual chemistry. One of the most

obvious themes in Shapiro's interviews with recently divorced people was how crucial it was that they had great sex. One woman explained that she had married her husband because "I thought he was hot." But to her distress, he put on weight and stopped caring about his appearance. The honeymoon was over. And the main way she knew was sex. She made it a rule not to have sex unless she really *wanted* to, but she seldom wanted to: "We had settled into a routine where we only had sex once a week or so, maybe even less. There was no variety, and no real mental or emotional rewards. There was none of the urgency or tension that makes sex so great—that sense of wanting to impress or entice someone. . . ."[34]

In her view, sexual attraction and chemistry were foundational requirements to finding someone compatible.

However, sexual attractiveness was not the number one factor that men named when surveyed by the National Marriage Project. They said that "compatibility" above all meant someone who showed a "willingness to take them as they are and not change them."[35] "More than a few of the men expressed resentment at women who try to change them. . . . Some of the men describe marital compatibility as finding a woman who will 'fit into their life.' 'If you are truly compatible, then you don't have to change,' one man commented."[36]

Making Men Truly Masculine

This is a significant break with the past. Traditionally, men married knowing it would mean a great deal of personal alteration. Part of the traditional understanding of marriage was that it "civilized" men. Men have been perceived as being more independent and less willing and able than women to enter into relationships that require mutual communication, support, and teamwork. So one of the classic purposes of marriage was very definitely to "change" men and be a "school" in which they learned how to conduct new, more interdependent relationships.

The men in the study revealed these very attitudes that marriage was supposed to correct in the past. The researchers asked the men they were interviewing if they realized that women their age face pressures to marry and bear children before they were biologically unable. The men knew full well that their postponement of marriage made it more difficult for peer women to achieve *their* life goals—but they were unsympathetic. As one put it, "That's their

issue."[37] Many of the males in the research were adamant that their relationship with a woman should not curtail their freedom at all. The report concluded, "Cohabitation gives men regular access to the domestic and sexual ministrations of a girlfriend while allowing them . . . to lead a more independent life and continue to look around for a better partner."[38]

In a *New York Times* op-ed piece, Sara Lipton drew up a list of prominent married political men who had refused to let marriage confine them sexually to their spouses: Arnold Schwarzenegger, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, Mark Sanford, John Ensign, John Edwards, Eliot Spitzer, Newt Gingrich, Bill Clinton, and Anthony Weiner. In every case, they had resisted the traditional purposes of marriage: to change their natural instincts, to reign in passions, to learn denial of one's own desires, and to serve others.

The conventional explanation for this is that marriage simply doesn't fit the male nature. In particular, it is said, the most masculine of men do not do well in marriage. It is argued that "a need for sexual conquest, female adulation, and illicit and risky liaisons seems to go along with drive, ambition, and confidence in the 'alpha male.'" But Lipton argued that marriage was traditionally a place where males *became* truly masculine: "For most of Western history, the primary and most valued characteristic of manhood was self-mastery. . . . A man who indulged in excessive eating, drinking, sleeping or sex—who failed to 'rule himself'—was considered unfit to rule his household, much less a polity. . . ."

Lipton, a professor of history at SUNY Stony Brook, concluded, "In the face of recent revelations about the reckless and self-indulgent sexual conduct of so many of our elected officials, it may be worth recalling that sexual restraint rather than sexual prowess was once the measure of a man."[39]

It would be wrong to lay on men the full responsibility for the shift in marriage attitudes. Both men and women today want a marriage in which they can receive emotional and sexual satisfaction from someone who will simply let them "be themselves." They want a spouse who is fun, intellectually stimulating, sexually attractive, with many common interests, and who, on top of it all, is supportive of their personal goals and of the way they are living now.

And if your desire is for a spouse who will not demand a lot of change from you, then you are also looking for a spouse who is almost completely pulled together, someone very "low maintenance" without much in the way of personal problems. You are looking for someone who will not require or demand significant change. You are searching, therefore, for an ideal person—happy, healthy, interesting, content with life. Never before in history has there been a

society filled with people so idealistic in what they are seeking in a spouse.

The Irony of Pessimistic Idealism

It seems almost oxymoronic to believe that this new idealism has led to a new pessimism about marriage, but that is exactly what has happened. In generations past there was far less talk about "compatibility" and finding the ideal soul mate. Today we are looking for someone who accepts us as we are and fulfills our desires, and this creates an unrealistic set of expectations that frustrates both the searchers and the searched for.

The search for a satisfying sexual partner is a problem all by itself. Another report by the National Marriage Project states:

> A pornographic media culture may [also] contribute to unrealistic expectations of what their future soul mate should look like. Influenced by the sexy images of young women on MTV, the Internet, and on the runway in televised Victoria's Secret specials, men may be putting off marriage to their current girlfriend in the hopes that they will eventually find a combination "soul mate/babe."[40]

But it would be wrong to pin the culture's change in attitude toward marriage fully on the male quest for physical beauty. Women have been just as affected by our consumer culture. Both men and women today see marriage not as a way of creating character and community but as a way to reach personal life goals. They are all looking for a marriage partner who will "fulfill their emotional, sexual, and spiritual desires."[41] And that creates an extreme idealism that in turn leads to deep pessimism that you will ever find the right person to marry. This is the reason so many put off marriage and look right past great prospective spouses that simply are "not good enough."

This is ironic. Older views of marriage are considered to be traditional and oppressive, while the newer view of the "Me-Marriage" seems so liberating. And yet it is the newer view that has led to a steep decline in marriage and to an oppressive sense of hopelessness with regard to it. To conduct a Me-Marriage requires two completely well-adjusted, happy individuals, with very little in the way of emotional neediness of their own or character flaws that need a lot of work. The problem is—there is almost no one like that out there to marry! The

new conception of marriage-as-self-realization has put us in a position of wanting too much out of marriage and yet not nearly enough—at the same time.

In John Tierney's classic humor article "Picky, Picky, Picky," he tries nobly to get us to laugh at the impossible situation our culture has put us in. He recounts many of the reasons his single friends told him they had given up on their recent relationships:

> "She mispronounced 'Goethe.'"
>
> "How could I take him seriously after seeing 'The Road Less Traveled' on his bookshelf?"
>
> "If she would just lose seven pounds."
>
> "Sure, he's a partner, but it's not a big firm. And he wears those short black socks."
>
> "Well, it started out great . . . beautiful face, great body, nice smile. Everything was going fine—until she turned around." He paused ominously and shook his head. ". . . she had dirty elbows."[42]

After scanning the extraordinarily unrealistic personal ads (where the kind of partners "wanted" almost never really exist), Tierney decided that young adults were increasingly afflicted with what he called the "Flaw-o-Matic." It is "an inner voice, a little whirring device inside the brain that instantly spots a fatal flaw in any potential mate." What is the purpose of the Flaw-o-Matic? One possibility he considers is that it is something developed by people "determined to get more than they deserve—and [to] reject anyone remotely like themselves." But Tierney concludes that more often than not this is a device that gives us an excuse to stay alone and therefore safe. "In their hearts they know why they need the Flaw-o-Matic. . . . It's not an easy thing to admit, especially not on Valentine's Day, but what they're really trying to say in those personal ads is, 'Wanted: To Be Alone.'"

In other words, some people in our culture want too much out of a marriage partner. They do not see marriage as two flawed people coming together to create a space of stability, love, and consolation—a "haven in a heartless world," as Christopher Lasch describes it.[43] This will indeed require a woman who is "a novelist/astronaut with a background in fashion modeling"[44] or the equivalent in a man. A marriage based not on self-denial but on self-fulfillment will require a

low- or no-maintenance partner who meets your needs while making almost no claims on you. Simply put—today people are asking far too much in the marriage partner.

Others, however, do not want too much out of marriage but rather are deeply afraid of it. Tierney believes, at least among his New York friends, that there are even more people in this category. Those dreaming of the perfect match are outnumbered by those who don't really want it at all, though perhaps they can't admit it. After all, our culture makes individual freedom, autonomy, and fulfillment the very highest values, and thoughtful people know deep down that any love relationship at all means the loss of all three. You can say, "I want someone who will accept me just as I am," but in your heart of hearts you know that you are not perfect, that there are plenty of things about you that need to be changed, and that anyone who gets to know you up close and personal will want to change them. And you also know that the other person will have needs, deep needs, and flaws. That all sounds painful, and it is, and so you don't want all that. Yet it is hard to admit to the world or to yourself that you don't want to be married. And so you put your Flaw-o-Matic on high. That will do it. That will keep marriage away.

But if you avoid marriage simply because you don't want to lose your freedom, that is one of the worst things you can do to your heart. C. S. Lewis put it vividly:

> Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation.[45]

So in our society we are too pessimistic about the possibility of "monogamy" *because* we are too idealistic about what we want in a marriage partner, and this all comes because we have a flawed understanding of the purpose of marriage itself.

You Never Marry the Right Person

What, then, is the solution? It is to explore what the Bible itself says about marriage. If we do, the Bible not only explains the cleft stick of our own making that our culture is in but also how to fix it.

The Bible explains why the quest for compatibility seems to be so impossible. As a pastor I have spoken to thousands of couples, some working on marriage-seeking, some working on marriage-sustaining, and some working on marriage-saving. I've heard them say over and over, "Love *shouldn't* be this hard; it should come naturally." In response, I always say something like, "Why believe that? Would someone who wants to play professional baseball say, 'It shouldn't be so hard to hit a fastball?' Would someone who wants to write the greatest American novel of her generation say, 'It shouldn't be hard to create believable characters and compelling narrative?'" The understandable retort is, "But this is not baseball or literature. This is *love.* Love should just come naturally if two people are compatible, if they are truly soul mates."

The Christian answer to this is that *no* two people are compatible. Duke University ethics professor Stanley Hauerwas has famously made this point:

> Destructive to marriage is the self-fulfillment ethic that assumes marriage and the family are primarily institutions of personal fulfillment, necessary for us to become "whole" and happy. The assumption is that there is someone just right for us to marry and that if we look closely enough we will find the right person. This moral assumption overlooks a crucial aspect to marriage. It fails to appreciate the fact that we always marry the wrong person.
>
> We never know whom we marry; we just think we do. Or even if we first marry the right person, just give it a while and he or she will change. For marriage, being [the enormous thing it is] means we are not the same person after we have entered it. The primary problem is . . . learning how to love and care for the stranger to whom you find yourself married.[46]

Hauerwas shows that the quest for a perfectly compatible soul mate is an impossibility. Marriage brings you into more intense proximity to another human being than any other relationship can. Therefore, the moment you marry someone, you and your spouse begin to change in profound ways, and you can't

know ahead of time what those changes will be. So you don't know, you can't know, who your spouse will actually be in the future until you get there.

Many people have bristled at Hauerwas's statement, and that is to be expected, because he intentionally is looking for a head-on collision with the spirit of the age. To create this collision, he generalizes. Of course there are good reasons not to marry someone who is a great deal older or younger, or someone with whom you do not share a common language, and so on. Marriage is hard enough, so why add the burden of bridging those gaps? There are gradations, then, in Hauerwas's Law. Some people are really, *really* the wrong people to marry. But everyone else is still incompatible. All who win through to a good, long-term marriage know what Hauerwas is talking about. Over the years you will go through seasons in which you have to learn to love a person who you didn't marry, who is something of a stranger. You will have to make changes that you don't want to make, and so will your spouse. The journey may eventually take you into a strong, tender, joyful marriage. But it is not because you married the perfectly compatible person. That person doesn't exist.

The people to whom this book is dedicated are friends Kathy and I have known for nearly forty years. Through them we have received intimate views into marriages besides our own. We became close friends with these five other couples during our seminary days; that is, the women became close friends and gradually their husbands became close as well. We have spent nearly four decades writing, calling, e-mailing, visiting, vacationing, grieving, and rejoicing together. Not much about any of our marriages or our lives is hidden from each other. One of the most satisfying evenings we can have together (say, at the beach) is to laugh over our early days of courtship and marriage. How on earth did we ever choose our spouses? From the outside, it must have looked nuts.

Cindy and Jim: She was an elegant woman raised Greek Orthodox, quiet, contemplative, and GREEK. Jim was boisterous, rowdy, funny, and Baptist. Then Gayle and Gary: Besides the seven-year age disparity and serious theological differences, Gary led two-week wilderness tours for college students, while Gayle's idea of camping out was staying at the Holiday Inn. Louise and David: Louise majored in art history and English literature and was serious about her Reformed faith. David was an Assembly of God lay pastor who woke up everyone in the dorm singing praise choruses. Wayne and Jane: According to Jane, Wayne was pure, unrefined gold, hidden under a Pittsburgh exterior, while she was a self-confessed Southern snob. Then there was Doug and Adele: Adele was a world traveler and seasoned missionary, Doug a younger Inter-Varsity

Fellowship staff member. She had just had a bad breakup with another man (also named Doug). On the eve of their wedding, Adele sat on the bottom of Kathy's and my bed and wept, wondering if she was doing the right thing. She now says, "Our marriage began at the gates of doubt and hell but is now at the gates of Heaven."

And, of course, us. Kathy was Presbyterian, opinionated, and sure that she wanted to be involved in urban ministry (based on one reading of *The Cross and the Switchblade* by David Wilkerson). I had just promised the bishop of my tiny, rural, non-Presbyterian denomination that I would *not* become Presbyterian, though I was attending a seminary that tilted in that direction.

Not a chance for any of us. But here we all are, happy, thriving, seeing our adult children marry and give birth, helping one another through surgeries and deaths of parents and crises of every sort.

Hauerwas gives us the first reason that no two people are compatible for marriage—namely, that marriage profoundly changes us. But there is another reason. Any two people who enter into marriage are spiritually broken by sin, which among other things means to be self-centered—living life *incurvatus in se*.[47] As author Denis de Rougemont said, "Why should neurotic, selfish, immature people suddenly become angels when they fall in love . . . ?"[48] That is why a good marriage is *more* painfully hard to achieve than athletic or artistic prowess. Raw, natural talent does not enable you to play baseball as a pro or write great literature without enduring discipline and enormous work. Why would it be easy to live lovingly and well with another human being in light of what is profoundly wrong within our human nature? Indeed, many people who have mastered athletics and art have failed miserably at marriage. So the Biblical doctrine of sin explains why marriage—more than anything else that is good and important in this fallen world—is so painful and hard.

Apocalyptic Romance

Modern people make the painfulness of marriage even greater than it has to be, because they crush it under the weight of their almost cosmically impossible expectations. Pulitzer Prize–winning author Ernest Becker believed that modern culture had produced a desire for what he called "apocalyptic romance." At one time we expected marriage and family to provide love, support, and security. But for meaning in life, hope for the future, moral compass, and self-identity we

looked to God and the afterlife. Today, however, our culture has taught us to believe that no one can be sure of those things, not even whether they exist. Therefore, Becker argued, something has to fill the gap, and often that something is romantic love. We look to sex and romance to give us what we used to get from faith in God. He writes:

> The love partner becomes the divine ideal within which to fulfill one's life. All spiritual and moral needs now become focused in one individual. . . . In one word, the love object is God. . . . Man reached for a "thou" when the world-view of the great religious community overseen by God died. . . . [49] After all, what is it that we want when we elevate the love partner to the position of God? We want redemption—nothing less.[50]

As a pastor, I've listened to hundreds of plaintive accounts of difficult relationships and lost love. Typical is the case of Jeff and Sue.[51] Jeff was tall and handsome, the kind of mate Sue had always pictured in her mind. He was talkative and she was shy and quiet in public, so she loved how he took the lead in social gatherings and directed the conversation. Sue was also decisive and future oriented, while Jeff tended to "live in the present." Their differences seemed to complement each other perfectly. Secretly Sue was shocked someone this good-looking would fall for her, while Jeff, who many women found to be too unambitious, was glad to find a girl who was so adoring. Just a year after getting married, however, Jeff's talkativeness looked to Sue like self-absorption and an inability to listen. His lack of career orientation was a bitter disappointment to her. Meanwhile, Sue's quietness looked to Jeff like a lack of transparency, and her soft-spoken shyness masked what he now saw to be a domineering personality. The marriage quickly spiraled down and ended in a speedy divorce.

Disenchantment, the "end of the honeymoon," is common and has been for centuries. It is normal, even inescapable. But the depth of the disillusionment people experience in our time is something new, as is the speed with which marriages collapse. In our day, something has intensified this natural experience and turned it toxic. It is the illusion that if we find our one true soul mate, everything wrong with us will be healed; but that makes the lover into God, and no human being can live up to that.

So why not, as many have proposed, do away with marriage as a dated

cultural artifact? Contemporary people are now free and autonomous individuals. We have seen how family, religious institutions, and nation-states—all the basic human social institutions—have been instruments of oppression. Perhaps the time for marriage itself is past. Since the 1970s, there have been predictions that marriage as an institution is dying. More recently, news outlets reported the findings of a Pew Research Center survey that found that nearly 40 percent of Americans believed that marriage is becoming obsolete.[52] As one star of the film *Monogamy* put it in an interview, "In this country, we have kind of failed with marriage. We're so protective of this really sacred but failed institution. There's got to be a new model."[53]

Deep Ambivalence

But despite this popular impression that marriage is on the way out, the critics of marriage are not so sure, and they are conflicted about it. Two typical examples are Laura Kipnis's *Against Love: A Polemic* (Pantheon, 2003) and Pamela Haag's *Marriage Confidential: The Post-Romantic Age of Workhorse Wives, Royal Children, Undersexed Spouses, and Rebel Couples Who Are Rewriting the Rules* (Harper, 2011). Both authors spend a great deal of time making the case that traditional marriage is suffocating and that finding a genuinely contented long-term marriage is a near impossibility. In the end, however, they argue almost begrudgingly that we must keep marriage, though we should be very open to extramarital sexual relationships and encounters.

But Elissa Strauss, reviewing Haag's book in *Slate*, counters that the author "supplies no evidence that trailblazers in non-monogamous relationships are any better off than those in monogamous ones."[54] Indeed, the "rebel couples" Haag does report on—married people who have had affairs or engaged with others through chat rooms—found the experiences unsatisfying or even damaging to their marriages. "Ultimately," Strauss concludes, "there is something strange about Haag's loyalty to the institution of marriage . . . as she all but fully disassembles it."[55] That nicely expresses the deep ambivalence with which the cultured critics of marriage today regard the institution.

There are few if any serious, sustained arguments being made today that society can do without marriage. Even today's critics of monogamy must grant that, at least pragmatically, we can't really live without it.[56] One of the reasons for this is the growing body of empirical research to which we have been

referring in this chapter.[57] Evidence continues to mount that marriage—indeed traditional, exclusively monogamous marriage—brings enormous benefits of all kinds to adults, and even more to children and society at large.

But we do not need to look to scientific research to learn that marriage is here to stay. The ubiquity of marriage speaks for itself. There has never been a culture or a century that we know of in which marriage was not central to human life.[58] And even though the number of married people has decreased in our Western culture, the percentage of people who hope to be married has not diminished at all. There is a profound longing we feel for marriage. We hear it in Adam's "At last!" cry at the sight of Eve, the indelible sense that locked within marriage is some inexpressible treasure. And that is right. The problem is not with marriage itself. According to Genesis 1 and 2, we were made for marriage, and marriage was made for us. Genesis 3 tells us that marriage, along with every other aspect of human life, has been broken because of sin.

If our views of marriage are too romantic and idealistic, we underestimate the influence of sin on human life. If they are too pessimistic and cynical, we misunderstand marriage's divine origin. If we somehow manage, as our modern culture has, to do both at once, we are doubly burdened by a distorted vision. Yet the trouble is not within the institution of marriage but within ourselves.

The Great Secret

As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, Paul declared that marriage is a "great mystery." We have recounted all the ways in which marriage is indeed a mystery to us. We cannot discard it, as it is too important, but it overwhelms us. However, the Greek word Paul used, *mysterion*, has a lexical range that also includes the idea of a "secret." In the Bible, this word is used to mean not some esoteric knowledge known only to insiders but rather some wondrous, unlooked-for truth that God is revealing through his Spirit.[59] Elsewhere, Paul uses the term to refer to other revelations of God's saving purposes in the gospel. But in Ephesians 5 he applies this rich term, surprisingly, to marriage. In verse 31 he quotes the final verse of the Genesis account of the first marriage: "A man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." Then he says, literally, that this is a *mega-mysterion* (verse 32)—an extraordinarily great, wonderful and profound truth that can be understood only with the help of God's Spirit.

But what *is* the secret of marriage? Paul immediately adds, “I am talking about Christ and the church,” referring to what he said earlier in verse 25: “Husbands, love your wives as just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. . . .” In short, the “secret” is not simply the fact of marriage per se. It is the message that what husbands should do for their wives is what Jesus did to bring us into union with himself. And what was that?

Jesus *gave himself up* for us. Jesus the Son, though equal with the Father, gave up his glory and took on our human nature (Philippians 2:5ff). But further, he willingly went to the cross and paid the penalty for our sins, removing our guilt and condemnation, so that we could be united with him (Romans 6:5) and take on his nature (2 Peter 1:4). He gave up his glory and power and became a servant. He died to his own interests and looked to our needs and interests instead (Romans 15:1–3). Jesus’s sacrificial service to us has brought us into a deep union with him and he with us. And *that*, Paul says, is the key not only to understanding marriage but to living it. That is why he is able to tie the original statement about marriage in Genesis 2 to Jesus and the church. As one commentator put it, “Paul saw that when God designed the original marriage, He already had Christ and the church in mind. This is one of God’s great purposes in marriage: to picture the relationship between Christ and His redeemed people forever!”[60]

Here we have a powerful answer to the objection that marriage is inherently oppressive and therefore obsolete. In Philippians 2, Paul tells us that the Son of God did not exploit his equality with the Father, but his greatness was revealed in his willingness to become the Father’s servant. He went to the cross, but the Father raised him from the dead.

> This shows us what God is like. . . . The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit do not manipulate each other for their own ends. . . . There is no conquest of unity by diversity or diversity by unity. The three are one and the one is three.[61]

But we must not stop there. In Ephesians 5, Paul shows us that even on earth Jesus did not use his power to oppress us but sacrificed everything to bring us into union with him. And this takes us beyond the philosophical to the personal and the practical. If God had the gospel of Jesus’s salvation in mind when he established marriage, then marriage only “works” to the degree that approximates the pattern of God’s self-giving love in Christ. What Paul is saying

not only answers the objection that marriage is oppressive and restrictive, but it also addresses the sense that the demands of marriage are overwhelming. There is so much to do that we don't know where to start. Start here, Paul says. Do for your spouse what God did for you in Jesus, and the rest will follow.

This is the secret—that the gospel of Jesus and marriage explain one another. That when God invented marriage, he already had the saving work of Jesus in mind.

No False Choices

We should rightly object to the binary choice that both traditional and contemporary marriage seem to give us. Is the purpose of marriage to deny your interests for the good of the family, or is it rather to assert your interests for the fulfillment of yourself? The Christian teaching does not offer a choice between fulfillment and sacrifice but rather mutual fulfillment through mutual sacrifice. Jesus gave himself up; he died to himself to save us and make us his. Now we give ourselves up, we die to ourselves, first when we repent and believe the gospel, and later as we submit to his will day by day. Subordinating ourselves to him, however, is radically safe, because he has already shown that he was willing to go to hell and back for us. This banishes fears that loving surrender means loss of oneself.

So, what do you need to make marriage work? You need to know the secret, the gospel, and how it gives you both the power and pattern for your marriage. On the one hand, the experience of marriage will unveil the beauty and depths of the gospel to you. It will drive you further into reliance on it. On the other hand, a greater understanding of the gospel will help you experience deeper and deeper union with each other as the years go on.

There, then, is the message of this book—that through marriage, "the mystery of the gospel is unveiled."[62] Marriage is a major vehicle for the gospel's remaking of your heart from the inside out and your life from the ground up.

The reason that marriage is so painful and yet wonderful is because it is a reflection of the gospel, which is painful and wonderful at once. The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope. This is the only kind of relationship that will really transform us. Love without truth is sentimentality; it supports and affirms us but keeps us

in denial about our flaws. Truth without love is harshness; it gives us information but in such a way that we cannot really hear it. God's saving love in Christ, however, is marked by both radical truthfulness about who we are and yet also radical, unconditional commitment to us. The merciful commitment strengthens us to see the truth about ourselves and repent. The conviction and repentance moves us to cling to and rest in God's mercy and grace.

The hard times of marriage drive us to experience more of this transforming love of God. But a good marriage will also be a place where we experience more of this kind of transforming love at a human level. The gospel can fill our hearts with God's love so that you can handle it when your spouse fails to love you as he or she should. That frees us to see our spouse's sins and flaws to the bottom—and speak of them—and yet still love and accept our spouse fully. And when, by the power of the gospel, our spouse experiences that same kind of truthful yet committed love, it enables our spouses to show us that same kind of transforming love when the time comes for it.

This is the great secret! Through the gospel, we get both the power and the pattern for the journey of marriage. But there is far more to say about what that pattern is and how that power works. So we turn back to Ephesians 5 to understand this great secret more fully.

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1 Frederick William Danker, and Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (3rd ed.) (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 303.

2 Ronald K. Rittgers. *The Reformation of Suffering: Pastoral Theology and Lay Piety in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany* (New York: Oxford, 2012), 47.

3 William L. Lane. *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 516. Another theologian who believes Jesus was getting a foretaste of the divine wrath is Jonathan Edwards. See his sermon “Christ’s Agony” in many forms. One place to access it is at http://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/sermons.agony.html.

4 Many people misunderstand this distinction and think Christ's active obedience refers to his good life and his passive obedience refers to his death. But actually the terms refer to two aspects of all his obedience. Even in his life he was beginning to pay the penalty for sin by suffering the pangs of human life that are part of the curse for sin; and even in his death he was actively loving God and us and fulfilling the positive demands of the law. See John Murray, *Redemption—Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1955), 20–22.

5 See 1 Corinthians 15:45.

6 See Galatians 3:13 and Deuteronomy 21:23.

7. When Adam sees Eve, he breaks into poetry, a very striking move designed to signal the significance of the event and the power of Adam's inner response to Eve. His first words are hard to translate. Literally he says, "This—this time!" The New International translation simply renders it, "Now!" The New Revised Standard Version does a better job, translating it to be, "This *at last*—is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!"

8. The figures in this paragraph are taken from W. Bradford Wilcox, ed., *The State of Our Unions: Marriage in America*, 2009 (The National Marriage Project, University of Virginia), and *The Marriage Index: A Proposal to Establish Leading Marriage Indicators* (Institute for American Values and the National Center on African American Marriages and Parenting, 2009). Both of these reports can be found in PDF form online at, respectively, www.stateofourunions.org and www.americanvalues.org (Wilcox) and www.hamptonu.edu/ncaamp (American Values).

9. While 77 percent of first marriages were intact in the year 1970, today only 61 percent are (*The Marriage Index*, 5). Put another way, today about 45 percent of all marriages end in separation or divorce (*The State of Our Unions*, 78).

10. *The Marriage Index*, 5.

11. “The Decline of Marriage and the Rise of New Families” (Pew Research Center Report, November 18, 2010). Accessed at http://pewsocialtrends.org/2010/11/18/the-decline-of-marriage-and-rise-of-new-families/2/

12. Wilcox, *The State of Our Unions*, 84.

13. Mindy E. Scott, et al., “Young Adult Attitudes about Relationships and Marriage: Times May Have Changed, but Expectations Remain High,” in *Child Trends: Research Brief* (Publication #2009-30, July 2009). See front page. Accessed at www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2009_07_08_RB_YoungAdultAttitudes.pdf.

14. David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *The State of Our Unions: 2002—Why Men Won't Commit* (National Marriage Project), 11.

15. Ibid., 85.

16. Ibid. People who cohabit before marriage end up getting divorced at higher rates than those who do not cohabit before the wedding. However, there is no agreement on why this is true. Some believe that the experience of cohabitation teaches people bad habits that later serve the couple poorly when they are married. Others theorize that people who choose to cohabit before marriage have different characteristics than those who do not, and it is these preexisting characteristics, not the cohabitation itself, that causes the marriages to later break up. These theories do not make much difference to the ultimate finding. The willingness to cohabit is associated with future marital weakness. Regardless of the causes, a desire and choice to cohabit weakens your chances for a strong future marriage.

17. “Your Chances of Divorce May Be Much Lower than You Think,” in Wilcox, *The State of Our Unions, 2009,* 80.

18. Popenoe, *The State of Our Unions*, p. 7. One of the ten reasons men give for living together rather than marrying is “They want to own a house before they get a wife” (number 9).

19. “The Surprising Economic Benefits of Marriage,” in Wilcox, *The State of Our Unions*, 86.

20. Ibid., 87.

21. http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20090823064213AAoKwvq

22. Adam Sternburgh, “A Brutally Candid Oral History of Breaking Up,” *New York Times Magazine*, March 11, 2011.

23. Ibid.

24. Linda Waite, et al., *Does Divorce Make People Happy? Findings from a Study of Unhappy Marriages* (American Values Institute, 2002). See www.americanvalues.org/UnhappyMarriages.pdf.

25. “The study found that on average unhappily married adults who divorced were no happier than unhappily married adults who stayed married when rated on any of the 12 separate measures of psychological well-being. Divorce did not typically reduce symptoms of depression, raise self-esteem, or increase a sense of mastery. This was even true after controlling for race, age, gender and income. . . . [R]esults like these suggest the benefits of divorce have been oversold,” says Linda J. Waite. From the press release for *Does Divorce Make People Happy?*, which can be found at www.americanvalues.org/html/r-unhappy_ii.html.

26. “The Decline of Marriage” (2010 Pew Center report). This report concludes that 84 percent of married people are very satisfied with their family lives, compared to 71 percent of those living with a partner, 66 percent of those who are single, and 50 percent of those who are divorced or separated.

27. Wilcox, *The State of Our Unions*, 101.

28. See “Teen Attitudes about Marriage and Family” in Wilcox, *The State of Our Unions*, 113. Yet surprisingly, after years of increasing, the number of teens who think that cohabiting before marriage is a “good idea” has begun to decline. The report concludes, “Both boys and girls have become more accepting of lifestyles that are alternatives to marriage, especially unwed childbearing, although the latest data show a surprising drop in acceptance of premarital cohabitation” (p. 112).

29. John Witte, Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 209.

30. See his article “God’s Joust, God’s Justice: An Illustration from the History of Marriage Law” in *Christian Perspectives on Legal Thought*, ed. M. McConnell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 406ff.

31. See W. Bradford Wilcox. *Why Marriage Matters: Twenty-six Conclusions from the Social Sciences*, 3rd ed. (Institute for American Values, 2011). One of the findings of this volume is that "marriage seems to be particularly important in civilizing men, turning their attention away from dangerous, antisocial, or self-centered activities and towards the needs of a family." See www.americanvalues.org/html/r-wmm.html.

32. *New York Times*, December 31, 2010, www.nytimes.com/2011/01/02/weekinreview/02parkerpope.html.

33. Popenoe and Whitehead, *The State of Our Unions.* Accessed at www .virginia.edu/marriageproject/pdfs/SOOU2002.pdf.

34. Sternburgh, “A Brutally Candid Oral History.”

35. Ibid., 13.

36. Ibid., 15.

37. Ibid., 17.

38. Ibid., 17.

39. Sara Lipton, “Those Manly Men of Yore,” *New York Times*, June 17, 2011.

40. Popenoe and Whitehead, *The State of Our Unions*, 14. Accessed at www.virginia.edu/marriageproject/pdfs/SOOU2004.pdf.

41. Ibid.

42. John Tierney, “The Big City: Picky, Picky, Picky,” *New York Times*, February 12, 1995.

43. *Haven in a Heartless World*: *The Family Besieged* (New York, Basic Books, 1977). Lasch was one of the first to contrast the traditional understanding of marriage as the creation of character and community with the “therapeutic” view of marriage as the fulfillment of autonomous individuals’ personal needs.

44. Tierney, “Picky, Picky, Picky.”

45. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, 1960), 123.

46. Stanley Hauerwas, “Sex and Politics: Bertrand Russell and ‘Human Sexuality,’” *Christian Century*, April 19, 1978, 417–422. Available online at www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1797.

47. A Latin term meaning “to be curved inward on oneself” used by Martin Luther to describe sinful human nature. See his lectures on Romans where he uses this term several times to describe the original sin and ordinary sinfulness. For much more on the subject of self-centeredness as the main problem in marriage, see chapter 2, The Power for Marriage.

48. *Love in the Western World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), 300. Quoted in Diogenes Allen, *Love: Christian Romance, Marriage, Friendship* (Eugene, OR, Wipf and Stock, 2006). 96.

49. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973), 160.

50. Ibid., 167. In the book *Counterfeit Gods* (Dutton, 2009), I apply Becker's analysis to a close reading of the Biblical story of Jacob, Rachel, and Leah. See chapter 2, Love Is Not All You Need.

51. Examples of married couples such as this one, as they appear throughout the book, are taken from my personal life experience but are not cases taken from my ministry of pastoral counseling within my congregations.

52. See, for example, Sharon Jayson, “Many Say Marriage is Becoming Obsolete” *USA Today*, November 11, 2010.

53. Rashida Jones, speaking to E! Reported at http://ohnotheydidnt.livejournal.com/57296861.html.

54. There is not only no evidence that “open marriages” are better for most people, but there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that the opposite is the case. That was the message when Nena O’Neill died. O’Neill was one of the two authors of the landmark book *Open Marriage: A New Life Style for Couples* (M. Evans and Company, 1972), which has sold over 35 million copies in fourteen languages. The book ever so tentatively proposed: “We are not recommending outside sex, but we are not saying it should be avoided, either. The choice is up to you.” That statement, along with the famous line, “Sexual fidelity is the false god of a closed marriage,” backed up with lots of seventies-era popular psychology, provided many married readers with a warrant for sex with partners beside their spouses. In O’Neill’s *New York Times* obituary, it was said that the book’s “bolder suggestions [now] seem not so much daring as painfully naïve.” Some years after the publication of *Open Marriage*, O’Neill told the *New York Times*, “The whole area of extramarital sex is touchy. I don’t think we ever saw it as a concept for the majority, and certainly it has not proved to be.” She is referring to the fact that so many couples who have tried it have found it devastating, bringing in feelings of jealousy and betrayal that destroy intimacy. (These quotes are taken from Margalit Fox, “Nena O’Neill, 82, an Author of ‘Open Marriage,’ Is Dead” *New York Times*, March 26, 2006.) In other words, despite the popularity of the idea of non-monogamous marriages, there is no empirical or anecdotal evidence that it works at all.

55. Elissa Strauss, “Is Non-Monogamy the Secret to a Lasting Marriage?” Posted June 1, 2011, at slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2011.

56. For example, in Mark Oppenheimer's *New York Times Magazine* June 30, 2011, article "Married, with Infidelities," he quotes sex-advice columnist Dan Savage as saying, "I acknowledge the advantages of monogamy . . . when it comes to sexual safety, infections, emotional safety, paternity assurances. But people in monogamous relationships have to be willing to meet me a quarter of the way and acknowledge the drawbacks of monogamy . . ."

57. For example, see Dr. Neil Clark Warren, “On Second Thought, Don’t Get Married,” at huffingtonpost.com/dr-neil-clark-warren/on-second-thought-dont-ge_b_888874.html.

58. This sounds like a controversial statement, but it is not. As all social history books will tell you, marriage had its origins in “prehistory”—in other words, the human race cannot remember a time in which marriage did not exist. There have been some efforts to make the case that this or that remote culture or small ethnic group has existed without marriage, but none of these efforts are widely regarded as successful. One example is the argument some have made regarding the Mosuo (or the “Na people”), a small ethnic population in southern China. In this society, marriage partners do not live together in the same home. Brothers and sisters live together in households and raise the children of the sisters. Men are held most responsible to support and raise their sisters’ children—their nieces and nephews, not their biological children. This family arrangement is highly unusual, but that does not mean that marriage and family mores are not in existence and, indeed, they are strongly enforced. Fathers are definitely part of their children’s lives even though they do not live in the same household. Women form long-term relationships with their partners. Some married couples practice cohabitation as well. See Tami Blumenthal’s 2009 report, *The Na of Southwest China: Debunking the Myths*, at web.pdx.edu/~tblu2/Na/myths.pdf.

59. P. T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 109–10. I follow closely O'Brien's exegesis of the Ephesians 5 passage throughout this book. In particular, I believe he is right in his belief that in Paul, "there are not many mysteries but several aspects of one mystery" (pp. 433–4). "The mystery [secret] is not . . . marriage itself; it is the union of Christ and the church that is reflected in Christian marriage. . . . [Marriage] reproduces in miniature the beauty shared between the Bridegroom and the Bride. And through it all the mystery of the gospel is unveiled"(p. 434).

60. G. W. Knight, “Husbands and Wives as Analogues of Christ and the Church: Ephesians 5:21–33 and Colossians 3:18–19,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, eds. J. Piper and W. Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), 176. Quoted in O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 434n.

61. Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004), 456.

62. O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 434.

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