

May 2021

Covenant and the true nature of marriage

Part I: The Exodus

Introduction

As we have said, the Bible uses marriage as an image of the love of God for his people. Further, in the Bible marriage is understood as a covenant. Marriage imagery helps us understand God's love for us and, in turn, God's covenant reveals the true nature of marriage.

The covenant that God established with his people was like and unlike other covenants in the ancient world. While it bears resemblance to the kind of covenant that a king could impose on his subjects, it is more like that of a covenant between a husband and wife, which in the biblical understanding is the love between equals that is exclusive, brings forth new life, and lasts for a lifetime, or in the case of God, forever.

God's love is revealed in his choice of Israel and his rescue of them from slavery. Israel's love is revealed in their obedience to God's law and their fidelity to him. They must not serve other gods. Israel will produce a way of life that is filled with righteousness, justice, and care for the poor, and ultimately, they will be a light to the nations. In that way they will participate in the rescue of humanity. Moreover, this love is permanent. God's promises, his commitments, will not end. They will be fulfilled when God and his faithful bride live together in a new and transformed creation.

It is hard to imagine something that is more central to Israel's self-understanding than that they were once slaves in Egypt and had been rescued by God in a dramatic, miraculous manner. The Exodus and the covenant at Sinai made the family of Abraham into the nation of Israel. Covenant was not a lofty theological idea. It was a reality born of the practical, nitty-gritty experience of a real human family.

In keeping with how God operates, at the center of one of the most pivotal moments in human history was a family meal of roast lamb, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs. This meal took place on a night far different from any other they had experienced. They smeared blood from the sacrificed lamb on the doorposts and lintels of their houses. That night the angel of the Lord passed over those houses and visited death on the first born of any house not so marked. It was the night they were rescued from slavery.

Remembering that night became the central festival of Israel from that moment on. It was on one such occasion of remembering the Exodus that Jesus broke bread, blessed wine with his disciples, and gave his very body and blood to us as our food for eternal life.

The books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua tell the story of God's rescue of his people from slavery, the establishment of a covenant, the giving and receiving of the commandments, the long wandering in the wilderness, the complicated process of settling in the land that was promised to Abraham, the ongoing struggle with idolatry, and the importance of remembering this story.

These books highlight the importance of remembering and celebrating those great events. They recall the complicated story of successes and failures of God's people. These books remind us about the importance of celebrating our own anniversaries, birthdays, and religious festivals, and the great moments in the history of our country (e.g., Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving). They invite us to recall our personal conversion stories, moments when the Lord was especially near us, or rescued us, or healed us, or consoled us—both big moments and little ordinary graces. So, it is important to tell our stories and locate them in the big story of God's rescue of humanity and his desire that we all be with him one day in the new heaven and new earth.

Remembering those stories and telling our own story matters profoundly for two reasons. First, either God is at work in actual human history or he is not. If he is, then he is still at work in our own lives, because we are a part of this continuing story of God's love for humanity and his desire to rescue us and live with us forever in a restored creation, the new heaven and new earth (Isaiah 65:17; Revelation 21:1).

Second, our marriages are icons/images of the great love of God for his people. If God does not act in human history, our understanding that we are icons of God is at best worthless, at worst misleading. But more important, the iconic nature of our marriage gives a supernatural meaning and purpose to the ordinary life and love we experience in marriage. Our marriages point to an understanding of reality that is desperately needed today.

Scripture not only gives meaning and purpose to our individual stories, but it shapes and corrects us as well. We will notice on many occasions in our study that we are called to serve God. That is, we are called to worship him. In the book of Exodus, the Hebrew word for "to serve" has two meanings. The first meaning is to serve, or rightly worship, God. The second meaning describes service to Pharaoh, and later, to foreign gods or idols.

We are called to remember who we are; we are offered freedom instead of slavery. When put that way, our choice seems like a no-brainer—but the history of Israel and our own complicated path through life proves that it is not. Still, God pours out in Christian marriage a great grace that empowers us to live out our vocation. We, for our part, need to cooperate with that grace. We need to say yes to it in our words and in our actions. Through our yes, we participate in a true and mutual covenant with our God, who is always saying yes.



Exodus 1:1, 7–14

Pray

God, come to our assistance.

-Lord, make haste to help us.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit

-As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Reading: Exodus 1:1, 7–14

These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household. . . . The Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them. ⁸ Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹ He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰ Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." ¹¹ Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. ¹² But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. ¹³ The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, ¹⁴ and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

Meditation

The Hebrew name for the second book of the Bible is *Shemot*, "Names of." It comes from the first words of the Hebrew text: "These are the names of the sons of Israel." The Book of Exodus is the story of how Abraham's family became a nation. With echoes of the creation story's "they were fruitful and multiplied," it is also the story of all humankind. It is the story of a particular people in a particular place at a particular time, and it is also the story of all humanity for all time. Since the first sin and our exile from the Garden, humanity has been enslaved to sin and death. Both are ruthless taskmasters that make life exceedingly difficult. As we read this story, it is good to find our place in it. It is good to live with Israel in their slavery, to long with them for God to deliver them, to find ourselves at the foot of Mount Sinai waiting for Moses to bring the Commandments down, to participate in the making the covenant with them, to wander in the wilderness with them.

Quiet reflection: *Reflect on one or two ideas that came to mind in the reading or the meditation. Share one idea with your spouse.*

Prayers and Intentions: *As if you were talking to a friend, tell the Lord what and who are on your mind.*

Lord's Prayer: *Conclude your intentions by praying the Lord's Prayer together.*

Blessing: *May the Lord bless us, protect us from all evil, and bring us to everlasting life. Amen.*

Unity Prayer: *God, make our hearts one. Amen.*



Exodus 1:15–17; 22–2:10

Pray

God, come to our assistance.

-Lord, make haste to help us.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit

-As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Reading: Exodus 1:15–17; 22– 2:10

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶ "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." ¹⁷ But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.²² Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live." ^{2:1} Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. ² The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. ³ When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. ⁴ His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him. ⁵ The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. ⁶ When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. ⁷ Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" ⁸ Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. ⁹ Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. ¹⁰ When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

Meditation

In Genesis, threats to the covenant were resolved through the protection of Sarah and the miraculous birth of Isaac. The human family plays an integral role in the history of salvation. Here God intervenes through the courage and faithfulness of two midwives. He protects the child of the priestly couple. That child is rescued by the daughter of the very person who is set on destroying the Hebrews. History of God's rescue of humanity is the story of God at work in and through the free actions of human beings. He is faithful to his promises and does indeed rescue us through the free actions of human beings.

Quiet reflection: *Reflect on one or two ideas that came to mind in the reading or the meditation. Share one idea with your spouse.*

Prayers and Intentions: *As if you were talking to a friend, tell the Lord what and who are on your mind.*

Lord's Prayer: *Conclude your intentions by praying the Lord's Prayer together.*

Blessing: *May the Lord bless us, protect us from all evil, and bring us to everlasting life. Amen.*

Unity Prayer: *God, make our hearts one. Amen.*



Exodus 2:23–25

Pray

God, come to our assistance.

-Lord, make haste to help us.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit

-As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Reading: Exodus 2:23–25

After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. ²⁴ God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. ²⁵ God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

Meditation

God remembered the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That is not to say that it just occurred to him in that moment. He had prepared for this moment years before by rescuing the son of a Levite couple. During Moses' long exile as a fugitive, God had prepared him to lead the rescue of his people. In the Bible, for God "to remember" is for him to take positive action. This action was based on promises he had made, the covenant agreements to which he had bound himself. He remembered his promise. He was faithful to it. He rescued them from slavery. For us to remember our marriage covenant means to take positive action based on the promises that we have made to each other. It is to rescue each other from the tyranny of loneliness and to lead each other to holiness.

Quiet reflection: *Reflect on one or two ideas that came to mind in the reading or the meditation. Share one idea with your spouse.*

Prayers and Intentions: *As if you were talking to a friend, tell the Lord what and who are on your mind.*

Lord's Prayer: *Conclude your intentions by praying the Lord's Prayer together.*

Blessing: *May the Lord bless us, protect us from all evil, and bring us to everlasting life. Amen.*

Unity Prayer: *God, make our hearts one. Amen.*



Exodus 3:11–15

Pray

God, come to our assistance.

-Lord, make haste to help us.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit

-As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Reading: Exodus 3:11–15

So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." ¹¹ But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" ¹² He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." ¹³ But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" ¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" ¹⁵ God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.

Meditation

To know the name is to know the person. God allows parents to give the name to their children by which he will call them for all eternity. God is the eternal "who is": He has no beginning, no end; he just **IS**. He gives us a less mysterious name in the person of his son Jesus. Jesus means "Yahweh saves." In all the "I Am" passages in the Gospel of John, we come to know this God who **just is** in a most personal and profound way. We learn that he is resurrection, life, light of the world, bread of life, living water, the way, and the truth.

Quiet reflection: *Reflect on one or two ideas that came to mind in the reading or the meditation. Share one idea with your spouse.*

Prayers and Intentions: *As if you were talking to a friend, tell the Lord what and who are on your mind.*

Lord's Prayer: *Conclude your intentions by praying the Lord's Prayer together.*

Blessing: May the Lord bless us, protect us from all evil, and bring us to everlasting life. Amen.

Unity Prayer: God, make our hearts one. Amen.



Exodus 12:11–14

Pray

God, come to our assistance.

-Lord, make haste to help us.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit

-As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Reading: Exodus 12:11–14

This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD. ¹² For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. ¹³ The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. ¹⁴ This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

Meditation

The systematic and public display of divine power over the Egyptian gods came to its solemn and terrifying conclusion on that night. God is God. The gods of Egypt are not! But why the command to celebrate throughout the generations? Because human beings tend to forget. Even the joy of our wedding and honeymoon, and our memories of young love, fade with time—often within a year or two. Without the regular reminders of rituals, festivals, and celebrations of anniversaries, without recounting the special moments in our personal histories, we become victims of the most recent events in our lives. It is also vital that we remember—in the sense of showing by our positive action—that the family is the place where children are brought up in the faith. The family is thus the place where parents are their children’s first teachers in the faith. They learn this “trade,” passing it down from one person to another: “When in time to come your son asks you . . . you shall say to him. . . .” (Ex 13:14). Memory makes the past present, so that we can participate in it. It becomes our story.

Quiet reflection: *Reflect on one or two ideas that came to mind in the reading or the meditation. Share one idea with your spouse.*

Prayers and Intentions: *As if you were talking to a friend, tell the Lord what and who are on your mind.*

Lord’s Prayer: *Conclude your intentions by praying the Lord’s Prayer together.*

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Unity Prayer: *God, make our hearts one. Amen.*



Exodus 14:19–30

Pray

God, come to our assistance.

-Lord, make haste to help us.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit

-As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Reading: Exodus 14:19–30 (excerpt)

The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. ²⁰ It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. . . One did not come near the other all night. ²¹ Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. ²² The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ²³ The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. ²⁴ At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. ²⁶ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." ²⁷ So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. ²⁸ The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. ²⁹ But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ³⁰ Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians.

Meditation

This marvelous story is full of drama. God kept the merciless enemy at bay and rescued escaped slaves from certain destruction, all in the nick of time. Then he thoroughly defeated those enemies. While this event is unique and pivotal in the history of Israel, it is of one piece with what came before and what will come after. The strong winds that separated the waters remind us of the creation story and give us a preview of the work of the Holy Spirit (the wind/breath of God) in the new creation. In the resurrection of Jesus, he will defeat humanity's most powerful enemies, sin and death. We escape our slavery to sin by passing through the waters of our baptism.

Quiet reflection: *Reflect on one or two ideas that came to mind in the reading or the meditation. Share one idea with your spouse.*

Prayers and Intentions: *As if you were talking to a friend, tell the Lord what and who are on your mind.*

Lord's Prayer: *Conclude your intentions by praying the Lord's Prayer together.*

Blessing: *May the Lord bless us, protect us from all evil, and bring us to everlasting life. Amen.*

Unity Prayer: *God, make our hearts one. Amen.*



Exodus 20:1–17

Pray

God, come to our assistance.

-Lord, make haste to help us.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit

-As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Reading: Exodus 20:1–17

Then God spoke all these words: ² I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³ you shall have no other gods before me. ⁴ You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. ⁷ You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. ⁸ Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰ But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. ¹² Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. ¹³ You shall not murder. ¹⁴ You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵ You shall not steal. ¹⁶ You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. ¹⁷ You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Meditation

The covenant with Moses, which will be solemnly ratified in chapter 24, specifies a way of life for God's people. At the core of that way of life is love, because, as we know, God is love. But this covenant love is not to be confused with modern self-serving, do-whatever-you-want counterfeits. God is fiercely jealous and demands fidelity on the part of us, his beloved. The covenant love in our marriages models for the world the fidelity required of God's people. There is a lot at stake. The good news is that God's tender, merciful love fills us with the power to live out our vocation and be good witnesses.

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Exodus 24:3–11

Pray

God, come to our assistance.

-Lord, make haste to help us.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit

-As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Reading: Exodus 24:3–11

Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, "All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do." ⁴ And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. He rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and set up twelve pillars, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel. ⁵ He sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed oxen as offerings of well-being to the LORD. ⁶ Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he dashed against the altar. ⁷ Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." ⁸ Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, "See the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words." ⁹ Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, ¹⁰ and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. ¹¹ God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank.

Meditation

Making a covenant was a serious matter. Israel agreed to live in the way that is stipulated in the Ten Commandments and in the practical ramifications spelled out in previous chapters. Israel agreed, "All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do." Blood was poured out at this point, first on the altar and then on the people. If either party violated their promise, they would suffer the same fate as the innocent animals whose blood had been shed. The sprinkling of blood joined parties in a familiar relationship and was solemnly sealed with a meal that prefigured the great messianic banquet, the wedding feast of the Lamb. A time will come when an innocent man, Jesus, will take upon himself the sins and brokenness of all humanity. He will in his own person pay the price for all covenant breakers. He will be the innocent victim whose blood will seal a new covenant. Making a covenant is a serious matter. Our marriage covenant participates in that new covenant and witnesses to the world the faithfulness of the love of God.

Quiet reflection: *Reflect on one or two ideas that came to mind in the reading or the meditation. Share one idea with your spouse.*

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