

Praying with the Bible as a couple: Marriage in the Bible

Welcome to *Praying with the Bible as a couple: Marriage in the Bible*, a new series provided by Marriage in Christ.

This is not a search for every time the word marriage or family is used in the Bible. Like all our Scripture offerings, the Marriage in the Bible reflections are designed to help you sustain habits of praying each day with your spouse. What is new is that these reflections will focus specifically on what the Bible has to say about marriage.

Marriage is a great sign of God's love for his people and Christ's love for his bride, the Church. The marriage covenant is analogous to the covenant that God makes with Israel. Adultery and divorce become analogies for idolatry and exile. And in the beginning Adam and Eve were created in the image and likeness of God. Not only individuals, but also married couples are living icons of a God who reveals himself as a community of persons: Father, Son, and Spirit of love.

The Bible is full of families, births, love stories, and family crises. Families, from the call of Abraham and his family to the Holy Family of Nazareth, provide the vehicles through which God works out his rescue of the whole human race. At the center of those families we see a father and mother, a couple with their personal story of love. Our stories are part of this great big story of salvation.

The Pattern

Each month we will provide an overall introduction to the 5–7 Scripture passages and meditations on marriage for that month. The introduction will provide historical background, as well as theological and literary context, for the passages we will offer for your prayer together.

We will also offer conversation starters and suggested loving actions.

By reading, praying over, and talking about key marriage passages in the Bible, we will come to delight more in God's vision for this wonderful state in life. The 21st-century way of life and approach to marriage is no more Christian than was the pagan culture of the first-century Roman Empire or the pagan world that Israel struggled with for all of its history. The authors of the Scriptures challenged the first Christians to live as if the new creation was actually bursting out in Rome, Corinth, Jerusalem, and other places in the ancient Mediterranean world. So, too, the new creation is bursting out today in cities and homes all over the world—and it is a challenge to what the modern world has to offer.

When we read and pray with the Scriptures, we also encounter Jesus as a couple. Let the Scriptures find you, heal you, challenge you, teach you. In all humility, let them show you a new way to live human life—in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the heart of the body of Christ.

Praying with the Bible as a couple: Marriage in the Bible February 2021

Introduction Genesis 1

God's glory, his promises, and his plan for marriage: The beginning of Genesis

Marriage imagery forms the bookends of the Bible. The creation stories in Genesis are echoed throughout the Bible. They begin in the garden with the marriage of the man and his wife and conclude with the wedding feast of the Lamb in Revelation. The creation stories reveal God's desire to fill creation with his glory and to have human beings, human persons made in his own image and likeness, bring his wise and loving care to that creation. They would act as God's agents in free, loving obedience.

The creation stories and the whole story of God's relationship with Israel (and with us) are about the unconditional promises, the covenant, that God has made with us. Covenants bind two parties. Each party has obligations. The story of Israel, the story of the Church, our own personal stories participate in the reality of God's faithfulness and our failing. Over and over, a cycle of covenant blessings is followed by broken promises and infidelity on our part. That in turn is followed by punishment for sin: being kicked out of the garden, oppression by enemies, exile in Babylon. Each disobedience is followed by God's preserving of a remnant and his great mercy, his renewal of the covenant. His greatest act of mercy was the sending of his Son, whose death, resurrection, and sending of his Holy Spirit ushered in a new age. We are living in that new age. And marriage is a privileged image of that whole wonderful and sometimes tragic story.

God created the heavens and the earth to be a sacred space in which he would dwell with humankind. God would be present with us, and his glory would fill the whole earth. From the beginning, creation is our divinely gifted home and also our responsibility. However, something went horribly wrong. Adam and Eve rebelled, and it was necessary for God to rescue humanity before his big plan could go forward. Salvation, then, is the subplot in the bigger story of creation.

The Creator will rescue us. In a great act of love, he will destroy death, and we, with our resurrected bodies, will live with him forever in the new heaven and new earth. That is the glorious end of the story.

We now turn to the text itself. Genesis opens with two complementary accounts of creation. It is important to think of them as the creation of an ordered space in which God and humankind would dwell together, and to avoid getting distracted by modern controversies about creation and science.

It is helpful to keep two things in mind.

First, in ancient Israel and in the whole of the ancient world, life was extremely fragile. Life was never taken for granted. Even one's next meal was not taken for granted. Life spans were short, and life was hard. A woman might have many children, but only three or four would make it to adolescence. Fertility, of the husband and wife, the domestic animals, and the crops upon which their very lives depended, was exceedingly important.

The daily experience of struggling to scratch out a living would throw into sharp contrast the creation story with its description of a world teeming with life and its promises of children: "be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it." This story must have expressed the deepest and most heartfelt longing of a people deeply in touch with the rhythms and vicissitudes of ordinary life. The same hope would continue in God's people, and would be expressed later by the prophets, who would describe it as a hope for a new creation, the coming day of the Lord (beautiful examples are Amos 9:13 and Ezekiel 36:35).

Second, to debate whether the first chapter of Genesis is a scientific account or not is to fall into a trap.

The enlightened modern claim is that for something to be true, it must be scientifically verifiable. What follows, then, is that if the Bible is true, it must be scientifically (and historically) verifiable. This attitude would have been very foreign to the ancient human author of Genesis. Moreover, anyone who pays attention to the history of scientific discovery, or, for that matter, reads history books, knows that scientific knowledge is provisional. That is, its explanation of observable data changes with each new discovery, or new theory. The Bible makes an entirely different claim on truth. Its only claim about the creation of the material cosmos is that it was created. The real purpose of the creation stories is to tell the story of how the one God created an ordered, sacred space which is not part of him and in which he could dwell in relationship with human beings.

This story would have been highly subversive and dangerous to the ancient tellers. For in telling it, the sacred authors took their pagan neighbors' stories and re-crafted them, or actually turned them upside down. Ancient pagan myths included deified forces of nature, monsters, mortal combat and the bloody defeat of the primordial waters, dying and rising gods, and a constant violent struggle to bring forth life. In huge contrast, the biblical story is about the majestic power of the creator God and the goodness of his creation. The story says, among other things, that human beings are the pinnacle of creation, that maleness and femaleness are God's intention and are complementary, that this community of persons (husband and wife) is the image and likeness of the creator God,

and that this community of persons is supposed to produce more persons (children). Can you imagine the fear and anger of a listening pagan priest who was sure that his bloodthirsty gods were being insulted?

At the end of the first story, we have a world that is filled with and reflects the glory of God. The heavens are teeming with birds, the waters with fish, and the dry land with animals. Humanity (male and female), made in the image and likeness of the creator God, is to bring God's wise and loving care to that world. These are the beginnings of the heavens and the earth (Genesis 2:4a).

Let us dive in. The first five readings and meditations focus on the story of creation found in Genesis 1:1–2:4a. Then we present two psalms that celebrate this very creation.



Genesis 1:1–5

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: Genesis 1:1–5

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³ Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Meditation

What a strange story it must have seemed. No big battle. No competing gods. One God, one voice, one word, one breath. "Let there be light"—and there was. Light, before the sun and moon and stars. How could that be? In the new heaven and new earth, when all is set to right, again there will be light without sun or moon (Revelation 21:23). The story was a challenge to the ancients, and is still a challenge to us moderns. It is not about how; it is about who. Ours is a God who is vast beyond our comprehending. He is a God who, with a few words, brings order out of watery chaos. Or, if we were to tell the story today, we would probably say that he spoke a word of love and the incomprehensible power of the Big Bang exploded. Out of that chaos came the ordered universe that we know, full of possibilities. He is good and beautiful. His creation is good and beautiful. Marriage is good and beautiful.

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.*



Genesis 1:26–27

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: Genesis 1:26–27

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." ²⁷ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Meditation

The Hebrew words for "image and likeness" suggest the images or statues of kings that populated the ancient world. If a sovereign could not be present in the remote parts of his kingdom, he would erect a statue of himself. No one would confuse the statue for the king, but everyone would be reminded of the king (and of who was in charge) when they looked at the statue. Israel had been given a strict command not to make images or statues of their God. Rather, the image and likeness of the living God, the Creator of the world, was human persons. Notice that God said, "Let **us** make humankind in **our** image according to **our** likeness; and let **them** have dominion." Note the use of the plural. From the beginning, God has been telling us that he is a community of persons. It was God's idea to create a human community of persons, male and female persons, to be his image and likeness. Marriage, the union of male and female, reflects God in a unique way.

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Genesis 1:28

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: Genesis 1:28

God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

Meditation

Husbands and wives become fathers and mothers and participate with God in the extraordinary task of being co-creators of more human beings. One of the great joys and purposes of marriage is to have children. It is the creation blessing that was not washed away by the flood (Genesis 9:1). It is difficult, but wonderful. Think about the fact that the children we bring into the world have the possibility of living with God forever. From our perspective, had our parents not had intercourse and been open to new life, we would not have come to know Jesus. There is so much fear these days about having too many children. Pregnancy is often treated as a disease to be prevented or terminated. For all of us, even for those couples who long for children but can't have them, children can call the best we have out of us. And as Pope Francis says, "to want to form a family is to resolve to be a part of God's dream, to choose to dream with him, to want to build with him, to join him in this saga of building a world where no one will feel alone."

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.*



Genesis 1:29–31

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: Genesis 1:29–31

God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. ³⁰ And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. ³¹ God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Meditation

A great artist knows when to stop. One more splash of paint, one more tap of the chisel, one more gouge in the wax impression, one more line would be one too many. The chances of ruining the masterpiece are too great. The great orator, poet, songwriter knows when to stop. God the master artist knew that with the creation of human beings he had completed his dynamic masterpiece. It was now very good. Good, good, good, very good! Humanity was what God had in mind. Creatures he made in his image, made to share his life, made to be one with him—they were the whole point. As his stewards they would bring his wise and loving care to the good creation. Human beings are the pinnacle of creation. Each person with his or her own unique glory and splendor, reflecting the glory and splendor of the great artist who is also a person.

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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Reading: Genesis 2:1–4a

Thus, the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. ² And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. ⁴ These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

Meditation

The author concludes this first account of creation by repeating the exact words he used in Genesis 1:1: “the heavens and the earth” and “created.” This was the first Sabbath, and God “rested.” What does that mean? The sacred author invites us to imagine the whole cosmos, “the heavens and the earth,” as a house grand enough for a God of infinite power and glory. On successive days he ordered and filled this house for his own purpose. A house is just a building until it is filled with persons. It becomes a home only when people live and work there. Now think of the divine rest as God’s moving into the house and making it his home. It is a home filled with his presence, with his glory, and with other persons: us. His intention was always to share that grand home with us, persons created in his own image and likeness, persons capable of having a relationship with him. For being capable of relationship is a fundamental component of personhood.

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Reading: Psalm 89:5–14

Let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD, your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones. ⁶ For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD? Who among the heavenly beings is like the LORD, ⁷ a God feared in the council of the holy ones, great and awesome above all that are around him? ⁸ O LORD God of hosts, who is as mighty as you, O LORD? Your faithfulness surrounds you. ⁹ You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them. ¹⁰ You crushed Rahab like a carcass; you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm. ¹¹ The heavens are yours, the earth also is yours; the world and all that is in it—you have founded them. ¹² The north and the south—you created them; Tabor and Hermon joyously praise your name. ¹³ You have a mighty arm; strong is your hand, high your right hand. ¹⁴ Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you.

Meditation

The heavens give voice to the praise that rightly belongs to God. There is no one like him. The psalmist subverts and repurposes the creation stories that the neighboring peoples have been telling. It was the LORD who defeated the raging sea monster Rahab and turns her carcass into his good creation. He alone has scattered the chaotic forces and brought order to the heavens and earth. They in turn shout his praises. But pay special attention to the last line: “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you.” These attributes of our God are his most distinguishing characteristics. They are also to be the most distinguishing characteristics of the persons made in his own image and likeness. We will see them again!

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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Psalm 19:1–6

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: Psalm 19:1–6

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. ² Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. ³ There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; ⁴ yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun, ⁵ which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy. ⁶ Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat.

Meditation

Lest we miss the point, here it is again. The heavens and the earth are full of the glory of God. They shout out his praise without even having a voice! Their very being, their beauty, their majesty shout out the glory of God. Who of us, having seen a particularly beautiful sunrise or sunset, a majestic mountain range, or, most powerfully, the first glimpse of our own children at their birth, have not thrilled to that great chorus of praise? Note the marriage imagery. The sun leaving its tent and crossing the sky is compared to a bridegroom filled with joy.

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