

The story of scripture is just that - a story. The Bible contains story after story of individuals who lived ordinary lives, who met with God, and some did extraordinary things as a result. There are stories of creation, battle scenes, love scenes, miraculous events, drama, and quiet moments. There's intrigue and high stakes plus moments that will make you weep and moments where you'll stand amazed. It has all the makings of a blockbuster film. For sure there are incredible stories to be read within the pages of the Bible. But the Bible is also telling one big story at the same time. All those characters and individual stories are involved in the great drama of Scripture about God the Creator who made man and woman in the image of the Godhead, how sin entered the Garden and broke the beautiful world He had made and the intimate relationship He had established between Himself and Adam and Eve where He would come and walk with them in the cool of the evening. The drama plays out across centuries as God sets aside a nation kept pure and holy from which would come a Savior and a Redeemer who would bless all other nations and bring them into this giant family of God's people. The Messiah would suffer and die to pay the price sin demanded and ransom those held hostage to sin. By doing so He would make all things new and in the end of the story we would find ourselves restored to a Garden where God would once again dwell among His people in unbroken relationship. But how would God go about communicating this story to His people and eventually His church and how would His people for all time embody this story to a world who had not heard of the Creator or His Son or the Spirit? The Scripture used a relationship that God had established from the very beginning, which we looked at last week. Marriage is used as a picture of God's relationship with His people throughout the Old Testament but it's nowhere more vividly on display than in the words and language of the prophets.

Here's how it started. God made the world and made Adam and Eve. Sin entered the world and sin spread rapidly to the point where God said you know what let's just start over with a clean slate. He looked and saw one righteous man, Noah, and said I'll keep you but I'll flood the rest of the world. So that's what He did. From Noah came a man named Abraham and God said I'll choose Him and from Him create my own nation which will stand in stark contrast to the nations around them – this nation will be named Israel – which is what God changed Abraham's grandson, Jacob's name to – he had 12 sons which became 12 tribes and because of a famine they ended up in Egypt. While there a great nation grew. This nation became a chosen nation, a holy nation, one set apart. God spoke with them, nurtured them, cared for them, and entered into a great and lasting covenant with them. But they rebelled against God and served other gods. They did wicked, detestable things, and yet God continued to call out to them. Continued to offer love and forgiveness if only they would return to Him with their whole hearts. Eventually, enough was enough and God followed through with the punishment He had said would happen if they continued down this path. Neighboring nations came and carried the people of Israel off into exile, pillaged the land, destroyed the city of Jerusalem, and burned the temple. Yet, even in exile redemption was promised and the faithfulness of God seen. After 70 years the people began to make their way back to Him and the land He had promised them.

The prophet Hosea sums up the difficult relationship the people of Israel, or in this metaphor, the wife, has had with her husband, The Almighty God of Israel. **When the Lord began to speak through Hosea, the Lord said to him, "Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the Lord. So he married Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and**

she conceived and bore him a son.” Hosea 1:2-3 The marriage happened but it was also painting us a picture of what was happening in Israel – God had also married a woman, Israel, who was committing adultery. I said before in our Revelation series that in Oklahoma adultery with an A and idolatry with an I sound the same. But Israel was committing Adultery though Idolatry. She was cheating on the Almighty God with false gods. **She said, “I will go after my lovers, who give me my food and my water, my wool and my linen, my oil and my drink.” Therefore I will block her path with thornbushes; I will wall her in so that she cannot find her way. She will chase after her lovers but not catch them; she will look for them but not find them. Then she will say, “I will go back to my husband as at first, for then I was better off than now.” She has not acknowledged that I was the one who gave her the grain, the new wine and oil, who lavished on her the silver and gold – which they used for baal. Hosea 2:5-8** Israel had decided to leave the safety and comfort of God’s home where she was looked after and protected to go after something new and exciting – they’ll give me everything I want – but then they didn’t. She chases after them only to discover they’re gone. They weren’t faithful or constant. They weren’t true to their promises. Not like the one, true God who does not change. So she decides to come back to Him but He says will you this time at least acknowledge all that you had before you left? The passage goes on with God preparing to punish Israel for all she did but then He relents and decides instead to try and win her back. **In that day, declares the Lord, you will call me ‘my husband’; you will no longer call me ‘my master.’ I will remove the names of the baals from her lips; no longer will their names be invoked. In that day I will make a covenant for them ... so that all may lie down in safety. I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in**

righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the Lord. Hosea 2:16-20 God will go after His wife, the people He loves, and will love them again. He will restore Israel and she will once again desire only God as her husband. The covenant God had made with His people is pictured in language that compares it to the marriage covenant between men and women.

The marriage metaphor continues when the prophet Jeremiah announces **God gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. Jeremiah 3:8** So now we see that the exile in this great drama is represented by divorce. The relationship between God and His people is marriage, the exile is divorce but this is the middle not the end of the great story the Scripture is telling.

Because even during the exile God keeps speaking of restoring His marriage covenant, He keeps saying He will remove the shame Israel has placed on herself. In fact, God says I won't just take you back I will completely restore you. After the exile is over God says **I will build you up again and you will be rebuilt, O Virgin Israel. Again you will take up your tambourines and go out to dance with the joyful. Jeremiah 31:4** It is in this renewed and restored Israel where the prophet Isaiah says the barren women we talked about in the first week of this series, will now have children, and "the shame of your youth" will be forgotten, the "reproach of widowhood" will no longer be remembered, and where God declares, **Your Maker is your husband – the Lord Almighty is his name – the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer. Isaiah 54:1-5**

The divorce certificate given by God in Jeremiah is due to adultery and the prophet Malachi makes clear that God hates this divorce. It's interesting to note that God's own divorce from His people was because of their adultery and this is the sole exception Jesus gives for

divorce in the New Testament. Without permitting it we would be held to a higher standard than our Holy God. God understands the pain of adultery and permits divorce because of adultery because He has experienced it Himself. Sin destroyed His marriage covenant with Israel just as sin destroys marriages between husbands and wives.

Yet, throughout the pain of Israel's unfaithfulness God continued to love her. He hated the divorce, and so continued to pursue, care, and make a way for her to be restored. Because God is not man and His ability to forgive and restore is limitless and unmatched by us.

However, the Old Testament ends with the people still struggling to return, with this statement of God hating divorce, the covenant of marriage not fully restored, the promises of redemption not completely fulfilled, and a longing for someone to save them.

There are 2 reasons for the use of the marriage metaphor in the Old Testament:

- 1. To show God's incredible, unceasing, faithful love for His people**
- 2. To show us the need for the Messiah**

"The primary function of the divine marriage metaphor in the Old Testament...is to prepare Israel for the day when her Messiah will arrive." – Matthew Haste

Only the Messiah can fully restore and renew the covenant, which marriage has represented. Jesus arrives to reveal Himself as the groom.

In the New Testament the marriage picture shifts and the characters in the great drama go from God and Israel to Jesus and the church. The Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians, **Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.**

Ephesians 5:25-27 Paul is actually drawing on the words of the prophet Ezekiel who wrote that God had also **bathed [Israel] with water and washed the blood from you and put ointments on you. I clothed you with an embroidered dress and put leather sandals on you. I dressed you in fine linen and covered you with costly garments.**

Ezekiel 16:9-10 Paul is making a huge point here that Jesus is making His bride clean and holy. Just as God had bathed, and washed, and bandaged, and clothed His sinful wife, Israel, so Jesus will make the church clean through His work on the cross where He “gave himself up for” us, His bride.

Then, later in Revelation, we see this marriage finally take place. The bride, the church, has been made ready by Jesus, through His work on the cross, and **fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear. (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)**

Revelation 19:8 The wedding that takes place in Heaven at that time fulfills what the prophet Isaiah had foreseen hundreds and now thousands of years before. **The nations will see your righteousness, all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow. You will be a crown of splendor in the Lord’s hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God. No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate. But you will be called my delight is in her, and your land, married; for the Lord will take delight in you, and your land will be married. As a young man marries a maiden, so will your Builder marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you. Isaiah 62:2-5**

Marriage tells the story of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation, from Garden to Garden.

Therefore, **The marriage metaphor, “is more than just an image...[it] is the ultimate reality from which the human institution of marriage gets its meaning and purpose.”**

Matthew Haste Christian marriage serves to point men and women towards the ultimate marriage with Jesus on a future day in a future kingdom. Every Christian marriage over the last 2,000 years has been part of the “living drama” and has helped to tell the great story of Jesus relationship and love for His bride, the church. The way a husband loves his wife, cares for her every need, the words he speaks to her and about her, and the way a wife loves her husband, desires Him alone, speaks to him and about him to her friends – it’s all communicating the gospel message. The relationship of the godhead is on display in your mutual submission one to another; the selfless love of Christ for the church is modeled in the serving and caring of wives by their husbands; the reality of Heaven is foreshadowed through the way the husband loves his wife as his own body, for Christ too loved His body enough to prepare her to be presentable to the bridegroom. So how are you doing? Is your marriage communicating all of this? It’s a big responsibility – which is why marriage should not be entered into lightly and why the enemy is bound and determined to destroy your marriage. If the enemy can destroy your marriage he can put a mark on the story of the gospel. The enemy will do all he can to stop the spread of the great story of Jesus and he has found an in by destroying marriages from the inside and then having the world look on to see there is nothing different about marriage between Christians than the marriages of those in the world. Your marriage matters to God, in part, because your marriage is proclaiming the truth of God’s message to the world.

However, marriage only tells part of the story. We’ve only looked at part of the great drama. There’s always more to the story – a second half, a plot twist, a surprise ending. We’ve only read the story of scripture through one persons account, but what about the other witness to the story? **“Relying solely on one metaphor diminishes the richness of**

God's character." – **Christine Colon and Bonnie Field** Celibate singleness also communicates the gospel message and reveals another aspect of God.

The Apostle Paul is the metaphor king of the New Testament. In some places it appears his philosophy was why use 1 metaphor when 3 will do. Not only does Paul give us that beautiful marriage metaphor in Ephesians but he also gives us another lesser-known picture in 2 Corinthians 11. In this metaphor the bride is not portrayed through the imagery of a husband and wife, but through a father and virgin daughter with Paul himself playing the role of the father.

I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. 2 Corinthians 11:2-3 Paul sees himself as responsible for presenting his child, the church at Corinth, to Christ in the same way a father would present His daughter for betrothal and marriage to a groom. The father, in that day, would have protected her and cared for her in his own home until her marriage. In the metaphors of marriage and singleness in the both the Old and New Testaments the bride is made up of both men and women – which is why metaphors are weird and poetic language gets confusing. Here in this metaphor the pure virgin includes both women and men who follow Paul's teachings. Paul is concerned the Corinthian church is being deceived and will be led astray from their "sincere and pure devotion to Christ." What's interesting about this is in his previous letter to the Corinthian church Paul had told them he wished everyone could be single and used unmarried women and virgins as an example of how they could be free from other concerns to be fully devoted to the Lord in both body and

spirit. Paul is showing the church a picture of a pure virgin awaiting her groom to convey wholehearted devotion in this life to be ready for the age to come when the church will be presented to the bridegroom. In this way Christian celibate singleness also paints a portrait. The church is pictured as an undefiled virgin here in 2 Corinthians. It's also how the church is seen in Revelation. If you remember from our series – Babylon or the empire of the world is portrayed as a prostitute, but the church is seen always as pure, dressed in white, as a virgin bride. It's meant to be a stark contrast. Remember the verse we read from the prophet Jeremiah about God restoring the adulteress Israel, His wife, as if she were a virgin. Jesus told a story in Matthew 25 about 10 virgins who were waiting for their groom. They got tired of waiting and fell asleep. When the groom arrived not all the virgin brides were ready to meet him. The point was that not all kept themselves ready and eagerly anticipating the return of the Lord.

The virgin bride in Scripture is a picture of what it looks like to be fully devoted to the Lord always ready and expecting the Lord's return as the Bridegroom. The virgin bride is the single witness who testifies to the sufficiency of Christ in all things by her unhindered devotion to Him.

If marriage paints a picture of the love of God for His people and Christ's love for His bride, the church, then singleness paints a picture of the sufficiency of Christ both in this life and in the age to come.

Celibate singleness proclaims to the world that this life is not all there is and bears witness to the entire body of Christ that we should all be eagerly awaiting the return of Christ, the long awaited groom. In this way, singleness illustrates the active waiting and preparatory state the church lives in at present. Both celibate singleness and marriage are needed

within the church to portray a complete story to the world. As Lauren Winner writes, they “are like the interleaved pages of one novel; both states teach...important truths about God’s story.” – Lauren Winner The story of God’s all sufficient love for the world shines most vividly when the two states are celebrated equally.

Now notice I’ve used the word celibate several times this morning. It’s a key part of how singles are part of the Great Drama – the big story of Scripture. In an oversexualized society, in a culture that glorified and idolizes sex, that uses sex to sell anything and everything, that exploits it, celebrates it, and promotes it to think that anyone could actually live life without it is ridiculous. It’s impossible, it’s unthinkable, it’s inhuman. A life without sex – here’s the plot twist. This sermon has taken a turn. The world isn’t supposed to understand it – single people remaining pure – this isn’t about teenagers not having sex until they’re married – this is about grown ups too – this is about single again people, people living with someone they’ve never married, middle aged single people like me, people older than me too – not having sex communicates the story of Scripture that **We are keeping ourselves pure because:**

1. Christ is sufficient

2. This is life is not all there is

A life of promiscuity, sex outside of the covenant of marriage messes up the picture of the Gospel message. So, singles – how are you doing? What story is your life telling the world around you about your wholehearted devotion to the Lord. Is Jesus truly sufficient in all things? No one said it was easy. I said it a few weeks ago and I’ll say it again today – salvation is free but discipleship is costly. But, this is the choice we make to follow Jesus. To

take up our cross – daily – deny ourselves – even the things that everyone else is doing - and follow Him.

One final, shared element celibate singleness and covenant marriage teach the church is God's faithfulness. Singleness in Scripture was both countercultural and a sign of radical devotion. The choice Jesus said some would make to renounce marriage was a declaration and a commitment to be faithful to God alone. Celibate singleness is a way of destroying the idol some make of marriage and sex and the view that they are needed for life to have meaning rather than recognizing relationship with a faithful God is what fulfills and completes a person. Celibacy is a way for singles to remain faithful to God even as He proves Himself faithful to those who have devoted themselves in this way.

Marriage also testifies to the faithfulness of God to His people when wives and husbands exemplify this truth through faithfulness to the marriage vows they made to one another. Purity continues in marriage – it's not just something we should teach to teenagers. Purity looks like faithfulness to your marriage vows and your spouse by keeping the marriage bed holy. Unfaithfulness in marriage communicates a truth about the gospel as much as faithfulness. Yet, **"if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself."** **2 Timothy 2:13** God remains faithful to Israel and Christ remains faithful to His bride, the church.

Faithfulness is fully on display through the divine marriage metaphor as played out in the drama of Christian marriages and as seen in the sufficiency of a faithful God to singles.

When the metaphor of marriage and singleness is used together, the church should be able to look at married couples and stand in awe at the picture they see reflected of the way in which Christ loves them and died for them. Equally the church should

be able to look at singles and stand in awe at the picture of sufficiency found only in Christ, a sufficiency which will be fully known by all on that future day for which the church is preparing.

The story of God's love for His people is on display on every page of Scripture. The metaphor of marriage makes this clear, but the story of how Jesus fulfills all things and proclaims the kingdom is here is seen through the picture painted by singleness. As we close this morning, I want to open these altars. Maybe there are married couples who need to come together to strengthen the commitment you made to one another standing at an altar years before. You need to come and pray together and for each other. There is a war on marriage but it may be you've been fighting the war "out there" and neglecting the battle that's been raging in your own home.

Maybe there are singles here that need to commit themselves to a life of holiness and purity for whatever length of time you are single. Not every single person in this room is called to renounce marriage but if you're not married today and you are a follower of Christ you are called to sexual purity. There may be some who need to come to an altar to pledge that commitment to the Lord. To settle some things.

Let's stand. We need each other – married folks need their single friends praying for them and holding them accountable and rooting for their marriages to succeed and honor Jesus. Single people need their married friends to hold them accountable, to encourage them in their walk with Jesus and to make space for them in their homes. We need each other – we need to pray for one another. Because together we tell the world the most incredible story ever written. We need marriages and single individuals to live faithful, committed lives to Jesus. Will you take a moment to respond to the message – at the altar, in your seats. But let's spend some moments praying together this morning.