

About Relationships

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[0 : 00] Well, let me welcome you all to this Lunchtime Bible Talk, to our second in our series of what the Bible teaches about being human. Last week we looked at how being human means being in God's image, and we examined something of what that meant.

And today we are coming to chapter 2 of Genesis, which is, and we're going to look at relationships today.

So let's begin by reading the passage, which you'll find on page 2 of the Bibles. And we're going to read from chapter 2, verse 4.

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no bush of the field was yet in the land, and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground.

And the mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground. Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living creature.

[1 : 27] And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.

The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers.

Named the first is the Pishon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. And the gold of that land is good. Delium and onyx stone are there.

The name of the second river is the Gihon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Cush. And the name of the third river is the Tigris, which flows east of Assyria.

And the fourth river is the Euphrates. And the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and to keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.

[2 : 37] For on the day that you eat of it you shall surely die. Then the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him a helper for him.

So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. Whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.

The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast in the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him.

So the Lord God caused the deep sleep to fall upon the man. And while he slept, took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man, he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

Then the man said, This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called woman because she was taken out of man.

[3 : 43] Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife. And they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

This is the word of the Lord. Now let's have a moment of prayer. Father, as we read these words about the very earliest days of human life on this planet, we're astounded both at their depth and their simplicity, at the wonder and the glory of what you did at the beginning and what you intend to complete at the end.

Now help us as we read your word together today. Open our eyes, Lord. Give to us clear insight into what you are saying.

Open our ears so that we may listen to your word. And above all, work in our lives so that the image destroyed by the fall may be renewed in us in Christ, in whose name we pray.

Amen. So we come to the second talk in what the Bible teaches about being human. I wonder what you think the most important thing in life is.

[5 : 05] Now I'm not talking about whether you're a Christian or a non-Christian at the moment. What I'm saying is, what do you place the highest value on in life?

Now some people place enormous value on money, on possessions. Some people place enormous value on career. Some people place enormous value on all kinds of things.

But I think ultimately, all of us, if we were honest, would agree the most important thing about life is relationships. Life is about people.

Life is not about money. Life is not about jobs. Life is not ultimately about leisure or anything like that. Life is about people. We are made for each other.

We're not made to be solitary. And the first negative note occurs in the creation story in chapter 2, verse 18. It is not good, says the Lord.

[6 : 06] The man should be alone. Now there's masses in this chapter who could spend ages on. I'm only going to very... But we're particularly going to consider what it means to be human.

Just a couple of introductory points. First of all, the environment. The Lord God planted a garden, verse 8, in Eden in the east.

By the way, the garden is not the garden of Eden. The garden is in Eden. The whole of Eden was not the garden. And humanity is placed in Eden, if I can invent a word, to Edenize the world.

That is the purpose. God's purpose is the whole world should be like this. And it's still his purpose. It's still his purpose that the whole earth should be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord. It's both a real place and full of symbolism. The water, of course, is the water of life. And it occurs again in the book of Revelation. A river flowed from the throne of God.

[7 : 10] And Jesus says in John 7, the river is the Holy Spirit himself. It's also a real place. The Tigris and the Euphrates, these are going to loom large in the story, in the later story.

Nobody knows what the Pishon and the Gihon were. Or rather, lots of people know, but they don't agree with each other. Some people think it may have been the Nile or the Ganges, you know. So many of these early civilizations grew up in river valleys.

But the important thing is this. God created a beautiful and loving environment for the first couple. After all, God isn't just concerned with the utilities, if you like.

God didn't need to give us sunsets. God didn't need to give us wonder of creation, which we are surrounded even in the fallen world. But he's done that.

So, the environment is Eden. And what's the purpose of that environment? Verse 15, the Lord God took the man, put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.

[8 : 19] As I said last week, work is part of human life. And there will be work in the new creation. His servants will serve him and they will see his face.

But work is not an end in itself. The Sabbath day, the seventh day, is the end. It's the culmination. And there is no eighth day.

So, with that in mind, let's look particularly at verses 18 to 25. The two human beings are brought together.

And the first thing to notice is this is God's initiative. It's God. It's God who creates the man and it's God who creates the woman.

Now, as I said a moment ago, the first negative note in the story is in verse 18. It is not good for the man to be alone. Everything else has been good or very good up to this point.

[9 : 20] Now, as human beings, we need our own time and our own space, don't we? We need times when we can be alone, times when we can retreat from the hustle and bustle.

But too much of that is not good. That is the point. We need both solitude and company. And God's purpose in creating Adam and Eve was to people the earth with other images of himself.

And in the new creation, there's a multitude that no one can count. So God's purposes are generous. God's purposes are loving. God's purposes are to bring people into relationships.

And the image is about relationship. It's very important to remember this. God's aim is to fulfill creation, fill the new creation with people who are like Christ.

To restore the image and to fill the world with people who are like Christ. The Bible, from beginning to end, is the story of that.

[10:33] We get it sometimes in the story of Israel's history. The prophets talk about the marriage between God and his people. The Song of Songs, a wonderful celebration both of human and divine love.

Now that does not mean that everyone needs to be married. And obviously, any group of people, you're going to find a mixture of relationships, aren't you?

You're going to find people who are not married and want to be. People who are married and wish they weren't. People who are happily married. People who are unhappily married. You're going to find all these things, aren't you?

Because we're in a fallen world. And it's never going to be absolutely perfect in this world. There was one perfect marriage on earth. And that's here.

In, we don't know how long it lasted. We've no idea, the time scale. But it's God's initiative. But it's not only God's initiative.

[11:34] Secondly, it's God's action. I will make, he says, a helper, verse 26. Sorry, verse 20, fit for him. And notice Adam is wholly passive here.

A deep sleep falls on him. The woman may come from man, but she comes primarily from God. This is totally God's initiative, isn't it?

And God's action. And the fact that he creates a woman means that in any balanced community, there's got to be both male and female.

I don't want to go too far down the road that men and women are totally different, have different gifts. But there are clear differences.

And we need both in any community. And the truly human community needs to be both male and female. Let me offend everybody.

[12:35] When men are too much on their own and get together, they tend to brag. In typical male gathering, whether it's a rugby club, dinner, or a preacher's conference, when men get together, they brag.

Fended the men now. When women get together and they're too much together, they tend to whinge. I'm not saying, by the way, that men never whinge or that women never complain.

What I'm saying is that it's in the dynamic of male-human... Glad to see at least one person is nodding. In the dynamic of male-female relationships, we need both.

You know, the stuff about women being relationship-orientated and men task-orientated. There may be some truth in that. But we need both of these things.

And in any community, we need both these types of gifts and energies. So God brings male and female together. Together they are the image.

[13:43] And together, in relationship, they carry forward God's purposes. Now, obviously, it's uniquely true of marriage, uniquely true of childbearing. But it's also true, I think, in a secondary sense of any kind of community.

And it is a great mystery. When Paul comments on this passage in Ephesians 5, this is how he describes it. And Proverbs 18, verse 19, fascinating verse, says, There are three things I can't understand, four things that are too wonderful for me, the way of a ship on the sea, the way of an eagle in the air, the way of a snake on a rock, and the way of a man and a girl.

Now, in one sense, these are not mysteries. David Ettenborough could tell us an awful lot about the eagle in the air and the snake on the rock. Other people tell us a lot about the way of a ship in the sea.

I think about it. Why this man and this woman? Don't we think that, don't we in our ordinary talk say, I just cannot imagine what she sees in him? Or how on earth did somebody like him get tangled up with somebody like her?

That's the way we talk often, isn't it? But it is a great mystery, this attraction of individuals. And of course, this happens on a lesser level, a secondary level in friendships and so on.

[15:08] We don't respond to everybody in the same way. We don't get on with everybody in the same way. But the point is that God, at the very beginning, has brought together this man and this woman, all of his greatest gifts.

And God, I suppose, as the father of the bride, brings Eve to Adam here. So, God is love. And one of the ways in which God shows his love is by giving us relationships.

But thirdly, we need to respond. It's all very well to say God creates relationships. God takes initiative. This is God's plan.

How are we to respond? And the first human words in the Bible, chapter 2, verse 23, are a little love poem. First human words.

A shout of joy as the man meets his soulmate. This is exactly the same as she, she, she, she. At long last, after all this parade of giraffes and antelopes and all the rest of it, I've at last found my soulmate.

[16:25] The joy of that moment. And yet, repeated in every kind of relationship ever since. And I think it's no accident at all that the first human words in the Bible are a poem and a love poem.

He said before, he says at Cornhill, I hope you like poetry because God loves poetry and God is a poet. And one of the best commentaries I've heard on this, and I always use it at weddings if I'm taking part, the commentary of the 17th century commentator Matthew Henry, whose works are still in print after all those centuries.

This is what he said. Woman was not taken from man's head to rule over him, nor from his feet to be trampled by him, but from his side to be equal, under his arm to be protected, and close to his heart to be loved.

That is wonderful. I'm not surprised that that has survived all those centuries. Anyway, that's really what this is about.

But let me talk, first of all, about this unique relationship, and then apply it to other relationships. Remember in the Bible, every time we come to the Bible, we're not necessarily going to come to a passage that speaks directly into our present circumstances.

[17:59] What we are going to find, though, is that the Word of God that over a period of time speaks into different situations, some of which we experience, some of which we haven't.

And we need to know this. First of all, the unique relationship, the initial, verse 24, you'll notice how Moses takes this unique situation and applies it to every subsequent relationship.

Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. Now, the one flesh means a union as close, even closer than that between a child and a parent.

It's an organic relationship. That is why the Roman Catholic traditional teaching says divorce is not so much wrong as impossible because God has joined.

Now, I'm not going to particularly develop that, but it is interesting that over the centuries some people have seen it that way. And it cannot be shared.

[19:05] Very interesting, actually. The Bible never condemns polygamy. There is no verse in the Bible that says you shall not commit polygamy. But what it does is it shows it's totally out of line with the one flesh.

What the Bible does do, it shows the disastrous consequences of polygamy. First of all, and in the lies of great saints of God like Abraham, all the mess that arose from Hagar and Sarah's bad relationships and so on.

Beginning of the book of Samuel, Samuel's mother Hannah and her other wife Peninnah. And, of course, in a mega scale with King Solomon in 1 Kings 11.

That's what it does. It doesn't so much say it's wrong. It says, look, this is what happens. This is the story. And it is a relationship of total fidelity.

Be united. Hold fast. Remember, this is, you hear people saying nowadays that marriage is a kind of social construct, a kind of invention, a nuclear family among mom, dad, and the kids.

[20:26] And the point is, the context of this is the so-called father's house, which was the basic social unit of ancient Israel, where several families lived, if not exactly under the same roof, in the same homestead, if you like.

Rather like today's multi-occupancy of flats and so on. And, therefore, it's in that context that the total fidelity is called for.

Because male and female are not social contracts. Male and female correspond to realities deep in the being of God himself, part of the image.

Now, this is a high standard. In fact, it's an impossible standard without the grace of God and the help of the Spirit of God. And I think we need to remember this.

There are two wrong views of marriage. One, two extreme views of marriage. One is simply a social convention, utilitarian. The other is the ultra-romantic.

[21 : 35] I tend to fall on that scale rather than the utilitarian one. But that's sad. It's not going to. I'm an incurable romantic. I'm not going to change at my age.

But there you go. Now, neither view is. Both views are certain. Truth in them. But neither is totally true. Because we live in a fallen world.

But the other thing I want to say is that while this is a unique relationship, it's a model and a context for all other relationships.

So, it's not that this is nothing to say to people who are not married. It's basically this is the model, the context for other relationships. And in Leviticus 18, the so-called holiness code, which talks about different relationships, places them in the context of this relationship.

And Paul echoes this, of course, in 1 Timothy. And elsewhere in his teaching about the family. Fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters.

[22 : 42] I mean, after all, in 1 Timothy, he says to the younger men, treat the younger women as sisters. You haven't stopped there. Paul's a realist with absolute purity.

And I think that is the thing because we live in a fallen world where we are going to be tempted. Things will go wrong.

Things will go badly wrong sometimes. But this is the gift that God has given, the gift of relationships. Now, one or two comments. First of all, in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul says that marriage and singleness are both charismata.

Gifts of the Spirit. In other words, in both of them, we can live a full life. In both of them, we can serve the Lord. I think that's so important to realize.

There are, both of them are right. It's not like the track, Two Ways to Live, in which one way is right and one way is wrong. Both these ways are right if they are in the will of God.

[23 : 49] And I think that's so important. We must remember our fundamental relationship is with Christ. And as we'll see next week, the first sin happened not when Adam and Eve fell out with each other, but when they conspired together against the Lord.

I think that's so important to realize. And the second thing is that it's often been said that singleness is a higher state than marriage.

That's been the view of the Roman Catholic Church, for example, who forbid their priests to marry because celibacy. It's not. Both are equally blessed.

Both can be equally blessed by God. God loves us. Sin spoils us. But God can make us new. And he can make relationships new.

What happens when we're tempted and everyone is tempted? Then we need to realize that only the grace of God and his love can keep us.

[24 : 57] In any relationship, whether it's a marriage relationship, friendship relationship, relationships in the family, in the church family. Remember, all families are dysfunctional without the grace of God.

And that includes church families as well. Don't imagine we suddenly sanctify family if we put the word church in front of it.

There are as many difficulties and problems with relationships in the church families as in any other family because we live in a fallen world. So you see, to be human is, first of all, to have a relationship with God.

Fear God and keep his commandments, says the book of Ecclesiastes, for that is the whole of being human.

But also, it's relationship with others. And our relationship with others, the Bible makes perfectly clear, is an important part of our relationship with the Lord.

[26 : 02] So often, in the letters of John, for example, I particularly emphasize this, how can we love God whom we have not seen, if we don't love our brothers and sisters whom we have seen.

Loving, of course, is something that has to be worked at. There's a ridiculous chorus. I'm glad I haven't heard it sung for years. My love just keeps on growing. My love doesn't just keep on growing.

I've got to work jolly hard at it. And we've got to remember that it is a gift of God. But like all other gifts, it has to be used. It has to be worked at.

So, to be human is to love God and love our neighbor. And one day, in the new creation, that will be perfectly realized when we are all like Christ and love as he does.

Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, how weak and sinful we are. How often our relationships are manipulative and selfish rather than looking for the good of others.

[27 : 16] And we pray that each one of us here may realize that we need to continually repent, but also realize that your grace is more than sufficient for all our sinfulness and all our needs.

And we thank you for these gracious blessings that you have sent into this world to help us on our way to glory. And we praise your name for this.

Amen.