

A Secure Marriage

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning to you all. Great to be back with you. Alright, well I'm going through a four-part series on foundations. Finding Christian foundations in a world full of people who don't know God and who don't have foundations in their lives at all.

So what are the foundations that the Gospel offer us? I started out by just looking at the foundation of the Bible, the Word of God in Psalm 1. Last week, if you weren't with us, I looked at the foundation of God's future, God's sure promise for the future.

Today we're looking at the foundation of marriage. And then, God willing, next week I'll wrap up with the foundation of prayer in the Christian life. So come and join with us next week as well.

Alright, so we're going to be looking at Ephesians 5, not in too much detail today, but we're looking at the foundation of Christian marriage in a world without foundation.

So you can have your Bible open at Ephesians chapter 5. I appreciated the Old Testament reading. I said to John, he can choose a relevant Old Testament reading, but very wisely because it's marriage, because our topic is marriage today.

[1 : 3 0] He chose Genesis chapter 2. By the way, there is an alternative version of Genesis chapter 2. The story of the Lord coming to Adam and saying, Adam, I'm really going to bring you a partner, I'm going to bring you a helper, and she's going to be the most wonderful person in your life.

She's going to do everything you want her to do. She's going to cook for you. She's going to keep the house spotless for you. She's going to look after you, give you the most wonderful children, companionship, everything you want.

And Adam thought this was wonderful. But because he was a little bit of a cynic, he said to the Lord, Lord, this is wonderful, but how much is this going to cost me?

And the Lord said, Adam, it's going to cost you an arm and a leg. And so Adam thought about it for a while and replied and said, well, okay, Lord, what will a rib get me?

But seriously, let's open our Bibles to Ephesians chapter 5. Let me just read to you as we start from two verses, verse 31, verse 32.

[2 : 4 5] For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they will become one flesh.

This is a profound mystery, but I am talking about Christ and the Church. And so as we consider the foundation of Christian marriage today, and I think we also need to consider our own marriages, I'd like to point out to you from the teaching of Paul here, in the letter to the Ephesians, Paul calls marriage, interestingly, a great mystery or literally a mega mystery.

He maintains that there is a foundational reality in marriage that is of enormous significance, even if it is the kind of significance that the world doesn't easily see or appreciate.

He calls it a mystery. So we need to, as we start, ask the question, what is the mystery that is my marriage?

In fact, 21 times in his letters, the Apostle refers to the Gospel as a mystery. And he maintains that marriage is a metaphor of the Gospel.

[4 : 29] We find him talking about this, of course, in our chosen text for today. But before we look at marriage, how do we define a mystery? Because today, in our world today, we regard the mystery as an unsolved problem, or perhaps a sublime but unclear truth that we've got to try and figure out, something only partly understood.

But Paul describes a mystery in a different way. Paul describes the Gospel mystery as nothing less than God's pending plan for the fulfillment of world history.

How's that? Once hidden, but now revealed. The Gospel mystery is God's plan for the cosmos itself.

Now let's have a look at a couple of illustrations. In Romans, another letter of Paul, chapter 16 and verse 26, God's mystery here, of which marriage is an illustration, is now known to the nations.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 2, Paul says, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.

[6 : 16] And then he goes on and he says, none of the rulers of this age understood it. And so, ironically for Paul, when God's final plan, this great mystery, was finally revealed to the whole world, incredibly, the world missed it.

The so-called wise, the cultural commentators, the powerful, the influential people, the rulers of the ages didn't understand it.

I can't help but think of that young peasant couple. She's pregnant. They have nowhere to really go and have their child.

And Luke, at the beginning of his gospel, writes, in the days of Caesar Augustus. You would expect God to work with Caesar Augustus and tell Caesar Augustus about the plans for the world.

But of course, we know that in actual fact, God is quietly working in the lives of that peasant couple, Mary and Joseph. You know, the world fails to perceive God's great plan for the ages.

[7 : 37] And yet, incredibly, as we're going to see today, marriage, the gospel, proclaims this mystery of the ages for the nations to see.

I'm not sure when last you saw your marriage in that way. Now again, let's unpack this mystery a little bit further. What is this mystery to which Paul constantly refers?

This mystery of which marriage is an illustration. Reminded of a great philosopher who lectured at UCT for much of his career, Johann Dierchener.

and he retired some years ago, probably one of the greatest thinkers this country produced. And he wrote a little book before he retired.

And this is what he says about the world. He says, quote, we are experiencing a collapse of unity. In the sense that the cohesion between the parts of the way we see things has been lost.

[8 : 56] And I've been saying that that really refers, does it not, to a world without foundations. What does Dierchener mean in that interesting quote?

Just think about it for a moment. The world is a wonderful place. It has a great deal of things in it. And yet, most can't figure it out.

Possibly, that's how you look at your life. So many people living in Cape Town who just can't figure out how it all fits together.

The universe is such a big place, is it not? When we look up at the vastness of the night sky, and then we look down at our mundane, everyday weeks that we've lived through, perhaps your week this week was pretty straightforward and mundane, well, we can't help but ask, where's my place?

Where's my place in this hugeness? What is the purpose of my life? The world is such an incredible place to live in.

[10 : 12] It's so exciting. Our world consists of a bewildering variety of things, of people, of places, objects, colours and shapes, websites, movies, experiences and events, feelings and sensations.

The other day, driving down the M3 and looking at the mountain, having come back from being in Klauteng for over 20 years. It's so wonderful to be back in Cape Town and look at the mountains.

The world is a wonderful place and yet for so many of us there's something missing. So many Cape Tonians, South Africans, people in the world just read the press.

People just don't really know the overall purpose. What is the overall purpose and the meaning to my life and all of these things?

How do I make sense of it all? Especially when I look, you might ask, at the brokenness and the confusion that is my life.

[11 : 21] You might say, well, I'm here today in this church in a fairly small city, in a relatively small country, in the tiniest corner of the known universe, where's my place?

Perhaps as a younger person in the congregation today, that has been your struggle for some time. I'm in this world, but how does it all fit together?

What is the meaning of it all, of the universe? What's the plan? Why am I alive here, in this town, in this part of world history?

That is a great mystery for so many people, is it not? What is God's solution to the puzzle? Is it going to be some scientific model?

Is that where we're going to find the theory that puts it all together, as some scientists maintain? What is the purpose of it all? Maybe it's some mathematical formula that somebody's still going to find out.

[12 : 35] Or perhaps it's got to be some kind of mystical experience or philosophy. Well, here is God's definition of the key to it all.

Here is the biblical definition. Here is the key to the universe. Unity. The mystery of all the ages of the cosmos is God's plan to unite all things in heaven and on earth under the rule of Jesus Christ.

You've got your Bible open there, Ephesians chapter 1 and verse 9. By the way, can you appreciate how weird this sounds to people who don't know Jesus?

You appreciate how it just doesn't really make much sense? It appears counterintuitive to the world out there, possibly even to you, and he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure which he purposed in Christ to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head even Christ.

Are you serious Mark? Is that of those verses telling me the purpose for the whole of the cosmos?

[14 : 29] That's exactly what I'm telling you and that more importantly is what God is telling you. In the cross and in the resurrection of Jesus Christ the final meaning of all reality life the universe and everything as one author called it is revealed.

Wow! See many of us have inherited the right idea that the gospel gets us into heaven. Praise the Lord! Many of us have inherited this idea that the gospel saves us.

That Jesus has come and has died for us to conquer death and sin and that's all wonderful and right. Praise the Lord for that. But the gospel is so much more the gospel the death of this savior and his resurrection is says the apostle Paul the very key to the entire cosmos and its meaning.

Isn't that amazing? It's incredible. It's the greatest and most important fact of world history. In fact, Paul says all of reality, all of the facts of history and the lives of all of us only really make sense in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is the meaning of true reality. The consummation of the meaning of the entire universe is found in the death and the resurrection of Christ.

[16 : 22] Of course, we can understand why the important people, the parliamentarians and the thinkers and the pundits of our age, well, we can understand why they can't accept that.

death of Jesus doesn't strike the unbelieving mind as particularly significant. Just the death of some Jewish rabbi, it doesn't appear to be profound enough.

And yet our apostle insists that it is here where the greatest mystery, the meaning of all the ages is finally revealed. So let me give you some advice.

If you are trying to find your place, if you are trying to find hope and purpose in your existence, you will only find it in the person of Jesus Christ.

It's God's decisive action in Christ on the cross, scoffed at by the nations. It is here where we find the very power of God and the goal for the cosmos reveals.

[17 : 35] Paul writes to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head even Christ.

What a wonderful thing to read and to hear. Let's unpack that even further. Paul is saying that because of the cross and the resurrection, all dissident, all dissenting elements, all conflicting elements, all the purposeless elements in the universe will one day be brought together, reunited, and find their intended place in the world.

I don't know about you, but sometimes I get a bit down because of the pointlessness sometimes of life and the way people just seem to mess everything up.

Do you get down sometimes? Think about the energy and the lives and the resources that are lost because of selfishness and a lack of unity and the brokenness of people.

It sometimes gets me down. Sure, it gets you down too. Paul says that in Christ one day all the pointlessness, the disunity, the anger, the suffering and the destruction will be defeated.

[19 : 06] Christ's death points to us and the resurrection to the fact that God one day will remake the cosmos, a new cosmos, one that will be very, very different to the one we experience.

Sometimes we experience a cosmos without purpose, with a lack of unity, a sense of waste. Often we find that in our world.

Well, Paul tells us that the resurrection points to the fact that a new world is coming that is going to work in every single dimension. Unity again, there's that word.

Now, Nick tells me he's preparing a series of sermons on Ephesians, and he's going to talk a lot more about these wonderful themes. This world that is coming, nobody is going to be out of place, nothing will be out of harmony, God will unite all things again in Christ.

Because Jesus will be seen to be the king of all, all things will be summed up in him. That's why Christianity is so much bigger than so many of the little sermons we hear.

[20 : 24] Christianity is about a mystery that is revealed, that sweeps from eternity to eternity. It's truly cosmic in its power and magnificence.

When Paul speaks of all things being united again under one head, Christ, he's of course speaking about the future when Christ finally comes to take us home, but Paul is also saying that the real significance of those Christian lives, the lives of those who trust him now, will also be fulfilled on that great day.

Let me read again from Ephesians chapter 1 from verse 9. And he made known to us the mystery of his will, there it is again, according to his good pleasure which he purposed in Christ to put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head even Christ.

In him we were also chosen having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in accordance conformity with the purpose of his will in order that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be for the praise of his glory.

He's going to bring everything together and to take all the dissenting elements in the universe and bring them together in a new cosmos. We can appreciate especially, can we not in South Africa, we live in a society where we know, do we not, what it means to experience racial prejudice, a lack of unity amongst people and culture.

[22 : 10] It's what makes the letter to the Ephesians and its message so pertinent and powerful for us. Of course you might say, Mark, that's great, but how can we know that this is what God is going to do?

How can we know that this is truly coming, that Christ's death and resurrection has such cosmic promise, cosmic purpose and power?

what is the evidence? Well, there are two pieces of evidence pointing to this reality which Paul gives us in this letter. Number one, it's in the unity of the church.

And number two, Christian marriage. You might have been saying to yourself, Mark, how does marriage fit into all of this?

Well, we'll get there in a minute. But before I look at marriage, let's have a look at that first little bit of evidence and that of course is the church. For Paul, the very existence of this local church proves that Jesus is the king of all who is even now working to unite people, working to unite people of different upbringings, different cultures, races, from different nations and countries, that even in this local church we have this incredible phenomenon that of course the world can't emulate, where God is bringing people together even now, bringing people together to live in a unity.

[23 : 54] The church is a picture of this coming world. Before I comment on marriage, let's first of all think about the church. Ephesians 3 verse 10, his intent was that now through the church the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.

The church is a manifestation of God's cosmic plan. Of course we look at our church and our church is full of everyday broken people, suffering people, we look pretty normal from the outside, but Paul says some incredible things about the church.

It is the only organization in existence which reflects the wisdom of God for the ages. Wow, how's that? It is a microcosm, it is the foundation of the coming new world, proof that God plans to unite all dissenting elements, all elements in conflict in our world today one day in a new world under Jesus Christ.

That is an amazing thing. Again, especially when we look at the brokenness in our society, the broken relationships, the lack of unity in the world today.

Wars prevail around us, politicians as we know are at one another's throats. I don't really buy the Cape Times anymore. And long after the demise of supposed apartheid, people speak about the supposed demise of racial tension in our country, we know that that is not the case.

[25 : 53] So many folk in South Africa cultures don't seem to understand one another. And Paul says there's a new world coming and there's going to be a unity that the spirit will bring between different people in the church who under normal circumstances would never get on together.

It's true, isn't it? A lot of us here today probably wouldn't really talk to one another if we were not believers, if we were just out there in the world, we would not enjoy the unity that we enjoy today.

Well, it's a wonderful thing, but again, you might say, what has this got to do with marriage? Well, you see, the foundational relationship of the church is marriage.

Everything that I've been saying about the church is really true about marriage because the foundational building block of the church is the family and the fundamental building block of the family is marriage.

The church is this model of God's plan for a new world and yet Christian marriages reveal to the world this great mystery.

[27 : 15] The great day, Paul says, when Jesus comes to present his bride perfect to himself, that's going to be the day when Christ takes up his throne, when all things will be united under him as the head of the church and the head of the universe.

And that means your marriage, even if you don't feel that way about your marriage. Marriage indicates not only that the new world is coming, but that in the case of a Christian marriage, it is present in this one.

And so, as I close, two ways in which this is evident in the foundation of Christian marriage, which of course, as we've been saying, is a metaphor of the gospel.

Well, first, the order in marriage points to the order God will bring about in the new creation. So let's pick up on something quite controversial.

How about submission there in Ephesians 5, 22 to verse 23? Obviously, we can say a lot more about marriage, but because of time, I'm just going to pick up on a couple of points as we wrap up. Wives, writes the apostle, submit to your husbands as to the Lord, for the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the church, his body of which he is the saviour.

[28 : 38] Now, very briefly, we know there's a great deal of confusion today about submission, and our world, our pagan world isn't really, take very easily to that idea, but the reason why I've spent most of my time this morning just talking about this cosmic plan of God rather than marriage itself is because marriage takes on a new dimension in our hearts and in our thinking when we understand how it pictures this new world that is coming, this new world of unity, we're all culture, and all dissenting factors will be united under a saviour, a new world of harmony.

It's a revolutionary idea, and the term, by the way, submission simply means to voluntarily arrange under. Paul is saying to the woman today, the married woman today, as Christ rules over the new harmonious universe as his head, so the wife is called to submit voluntarily to her husband as her head because this reflects this coming new world where all confusion, all conflict, all dissension will be a thing of the past.

We find something similar with the husband as he loves his wife, it's the love that Jesus shows the church, in giving himself to the church.

It is the love of Jesus that works itself out and the power that will reshape this old world and bring about a new cosmos. It is a sacrificial love.

Ladies, I can assure you that if your husband loves you the way Christ loves the church, you'd have no problem with submission. The power of God love that builds up in you the universe.

[30 : 37] So, how is your marriage as I close? doing right now? How do you view your life in the light of this wonderful plan of God?

But let's especially look at those of us who are Christians in marriage today. I ask you because almost all married people, married people today, even church going married people, have lost the true cosmic meaning and power of marriage.

Perhaps that's why your marriage has become an endless burden. Is that true? Full of conflict and endless drudgery. It's because you and your partner, although claiming to be Christian, have never come to see what marriage truly means.

Perhaps your marriage, like the marriage of so many, has become focused on the world, world, and so you can't see any more the coming new world.

Perhaps you and your partner and your children are so focused on this world and its passing treasures, its passing glories, the things that rust and fade away, that Jesus Christ and the coming new world is not at the center of your life.

[31 : 59] No longer at the center of your lives as a married couple. So I trust that you'll stay behind and join us for tea and coffee and some fellowship, but as you leave here later, perhaps you and your partner have some praying to do.

Perhaps you need to do some rethinking. Perhaps you and your partner also need to take some very serious stock-taking of your marriage, and its significance in the light of this coming new world.

Amen. Let's bow as we close. Father, thank you so much for the power of your word and for this letter. Thank you, Lord, for the fact that you're bringing about a new world, a world without suffering, a world where people will be at one with one another in love.

And we thank you, Father, that Christian marriage is a powerful message to the world of this coming new age.

Pray for the marriages that are represented here today, Lord. Bless them, help them to bid their relationship into your cosmic plan, to unite all things under Jesus Christ, the King of the universe.

[33 : 41] Amen.