Marriage Core Seminar

**The End of the Dream?**

Good morning, everyone – and welcome to the last regular class of the marriage core seminar. Next week, we’ll finish up with a panel discussion. And, as you’ll see on your handout, we have some pretty depressing material to cover. What I’ve titled “The End of the Dream?” When the dream of marriage ends in divorce, when it ends because marriage disappointments and we become disillusioned, or when—no matter how delightful marriage has been—it ends in death[[1]](#footnote-1).

So why spend time on topics like these? A few reasons:

1. Because you may one day walk through these things.
2. Because others you love will most certainly walk through these things.
3. Because—especially for our last point, thinking about the mortality of marriage is crucial if we are to enjoy and steward marriage as Jesus intends.

In all three of these categories—divorce, disillusionment, death—we need to keep the purpose of marriage in view—the purpose we’ve been talking about since week number one. Whereas *we* too often value marriage based on the things it *produces*, things like companionship, ministry, sex, and children, *God’s* purpose for marriage is grounded more deeply in what it *portrays*. That is, what it allows us to *see* about God through the experience of being married. And what it *shows* about God to those around us. Thus the title of this class – “The end of the dream” question mark. Are divorce, disillusionment, and death the end of the dream? That depends on whose dream you’re talking about. Perhaps the end of *your* dream. But not God’s dream that is richer, longer, and better.

With all that, let’s start with our first topic:

**I. Divorce**

Divorce is such a difficult topic. It’s difficult for us, and it’s also difficult for God. As we learn from Malachi 2:16, God despises divorce. But not from a safe and smug, self-righteous distance. God despises divorce the way a divorced person despises divorce. Not as a disinterested third party but as someone who knows the pain personally. As we read in Jeremiah 3 and elsewhere, God himself has been divorced. His people Israel committed spiritual adultery by worshipping false gods. And so God says, “I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it. I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries” (v. 7-8).

God knows what means to be betrayed and forsaken. He knows the pain of divorce. So let’s ask three questions about divorce: what is it; why does God hate it; when despite that does he permit it?

*A. What is divorce?*

We all know what a divorce is legally. But divorce means something biblically as well. As you see on your handout, divorce is the public and formal acknowledgement that the one-flesh union has been broken and the marriage covenant dissolved. Let me break that down.

* Marriage exists when there has been a sexual union in the context of a covenantal oath, the covenant described in Ephesians 5:22-33 as a one-flesh union. Divorce dissolves that union.
* Of course, many things can violate that marriage covenant. And whenever the covenant is violated, the marriage is violated to some degree. But not every violation calls into question the fundamental one-flesh status of the covenant. Jesus, however, tells us that some things *do* break that union, like adultery.

So divorce is the public and formal acknowledgement that the one-flesh union has been broken.

*B. Why Does God Oppose[[2]](#footnote-2) Divorce?*

Why does God so oppose divorce? A few reasons:

1. Because divorce breaks a covenant and God is a covenant-keeping God. Malachi 2:14 says, “the Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.” God bears witness against a man for divorcing his wife because every covenant between two people is also a covenant with God. And every broken covenant lies about a covenant-keeping God.
2. Because, also in Malachi 2 as we discussed two weeks ago, divorce compromises God’s desire for a marriage to lead to godly offspring (v. 15).
3. Because divorce destroys a picture of him. It slanders him and lies about him. This is Jesus’ answer to divorce in Matthew 19 that we quote at every wedding in this church. “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” That union, as we see in Scripture, pictures Christ’s faithfulness to us. So how dare we as human beings separate what God has joined?

This last reason is often overlooked, even by Christians. Again, we value marriage for what it produces, and when it stops producing what we want, we look for a way out, without ever giving a thought as to why *God* values a marriage. Without ever giving much thought to what a marriage *portrays*. We are far too utilitarian in why we value marriage, which is why we too often look for loopholes to get out of this God-portraying covenant we entered into.

Third question about divorce:

*C. When Does God Allow Divorce*

Despite God’s opposition to divorce, he does in fact allow divorce in some cases. Sometimes we ask what legitimate “grounds” for divorce might be. Biblically, it’s best to think of there being *one* ground for divorce. That ground is that the marriage covenant has been broken. It *has* been broken and divorce is merely the formal recognition of what has already happened. Scripture gives us a number of examples of what this looks like:

* Sexual Immorality, like Adultery. That’s what Jesus famously describes in Matthew 5 and again in Matthew 19. “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

This doesn’t mean that adultery *necessitates* divorce. By God’s grace, we have members of this church who have chosen not merely to forgive in the wake of adultery (which any Christian must do) but to reconcile and stay married, which is a beautiful and powerful demonstration of the gospel. Adultery doesn’t necessitate divorce but in the wake of adultery, the spouse who was sinned against may, without sin, initiate divorce.

* Abandonment by an unbeliever. This is what Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 7. Being married to an unbeliever is no reason for divorce. But, Paul says, “But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.”
* Neglect. A key passage that any Jew in Jesus’ day would have had in their mind when divorce came up would have been in Exodus 21. “he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights. And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Now, all three of these examples lead to very thorny questions. Is repeated, unrepentant viewing of pornography a form of sexual immorality that provides grounds for divorce? What if my spouse left me but still claims to be a believer? Is emotional abandonment a form of neglect? What level of sin actually breaks the covenant? These grounds for divorce are never meant to be proof-texts for a person to justify a divorce all on their own. “Ah, here it is…now I can divorce him.” Rather, they help us understand the covenantal nature of marriage. They provide a framework for reconciliation. And they set out the principles that the elders of a church will think through as they determine whether divorce might be permitted in a particular case. Divorce is never a decision that one should make on their own; it is a difficult decision that must be made in submission to the local church.

*Any questions?*

**II. Disillusionment**

Let’s move on then to consider how a Christian should respond when someone becomes disillusioned with their marriage. And by “disillusioned” I don’t mean you got into an argument with your spouse, or you had a hard week. I mean you wake up one day and realize that your marriage is far from what you hoped for on your wedding day—and you may even regret getting married. What do you do then?

Our culture’s answer, of course, is to admit that you have “irreconcilable differences,” file for divorce, assure yourself that this is unfortunate but necessary, and tell the kids you love them just as much as always even though you’ve “fallen out of love” with each other. Marriage no longer produces what you want, so you’re out.

As you can imagine, I’m about to argue against that. But let’s not for a moment underestimate the hurt and pain that a difficult marriage presents. A difficult marriage is perhaps one of the loneliness, most challenging, faith-testing circumstances God puts someone into. God is sufficient, yes, *and* this is so hard.

When marriage disappoints, we must remember God’s purposes for us and find hope in his promises.

His purpose, remember, is for your life—and your life in marriage—to be a beautiful portrayal of his faithfulness to you. And while a difficult marriage will change how that purpose is fulfilled in your life, a difficult marriage does not need to frustrate that purpose. If your goal for marriage is what it produces, disillusionment may well be the end of the story. But if your goal is to portray the goodness of God—to see and to show his goodness—then you can continue on with hope and even with joy.

That’s what we see in that passage in 1 Peter 3 that we looked at a few weeks ago. This woman is married to a man who, verse 1, “does not obey the word.” Her goal is to win him for Christ “without a word” as he sees Christ in her. Most specifically, as he sees her submitting with a gentle and quiet spirit, as she entrusts herself to God’s good plans for her, knowing that he is good. The trust she has in God, which shows up as a gentle and quiet spirit, portrays in high definition the trustworthiness of the God she serves. And that portrayal, made possible by faith, is unspeakably precious in the sight of God.

In life, there are two different ways in which our lives show off the goodness and glory of God. When things are going well, it is through thankful enjoyment that we see and show him to be good (1 Tim. 4:4). When things are not going well, it is through joyful trust that we see and show him to be good (Heb. 11:6). Every marriage will be a mix of these two. But when a Christian becomes disillusioned with marriage, they will need to lean harder on the second of these two—just like that woman in 1 Peter 3.

And for the person who has to learn especially hard on faith in their marriage, I love the promise of Hebrews 11:6. “And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” Two things here: first, this faith pleases God. Faith pleases God. He knows exactly how much faith it takes to respond to your difficult husband with gentleness and respect. He sees, he knows, and he loves what you’re doing. Second: “he rewards those who seek him.” Perhaps in this life, most certainly in the next, your faith will come back to you in abundance. Because the God you trust to be good really is so good.

With that said, where can a person find hope in a difficult marriage?

*Hope*

* One great and secure hope for the Christian is that God has promised to use the difficulty in your marriage for your good. No matter what mix of “my fault” or “their fault” that difficulty may stem from. Hebrews 12:10-11, “he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” Sometimes we say, “no thank you, Lord. I’d really rather not have the peaceful fruit of righteousness if this is the way it’s going to come.” Which is why he doesn’t generally ask our permission. He knows what is good for us, what will be most satisfying in the long run. And we can trust him with that.
* A second source of hope, as I mentioned before: your faith-powered perseverance of love in a difficult marriage is deeply precious to him. I assume that some of the most profound statements about the goodness and worthiness of God in the life of this church are being made by those who are faithful in difficult marriages. I love how Psalm 56 puts it. “You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?” Every sleepless moment of grief, every tear shed in private is seen by God. Counted up carefully. Always spent deliberately. He sees, he knows, and he is careful with us.
* Third: we have hope that God will provide for all that we need. Physically, emotionally, spiritually. In that hope, though, we must humbly submit to *God’s* determination of what we need. 1 Peter 5:6-7, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.”
* Fourth is a different kind of hope. Not the Biblical hope that is sure to pass, but the hope of what God *might* choose to do, which is to intervene. I think of a dear sister in a very difficult marriage who had finally decided it was time for her and the kids to move out. Entirely unaware of this, her husband went on a retreat at her church, and got saved. And their marriage changed dramatically. This is not guaranteed, but it is not unheard of! God loves to answer our prayers. 1 Corinthians 7:16, “For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?” No guarantees here, but we should never underestimate God’s kind generosity.

*Help*

That’s hope for those in difficult marriages. For those of us on the outside, how can we help? A few thoughts for you:

* Persist in prayer and friendship. What someone in a difficult marriage craves is a Christian brother or sister who will be there all the time, no matter what. Friendship over the long haul.
* Understanding. It’s so easy to judge what others do under difficult circumstances. To be frustrated with them. Even irritated. And yes—difficult circumstances do tempt us toward sin, and sometimes people fail that test. But those of us in happy marriages, or not married, can never comprehend the challenge of being in a difficult marriage. So seek understanding.
* Encourage their faith. That’s what someone in a hard place needs more than anything. “Keep on trusting. Yes, God can be trusted. You’re almost there, keep on going.” Hebrews 10:24, “let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

*Any questions?*

**III. Death**

A marriage has death in mind from the very beginning. What’s that promise a couple makes on their wedding day? “To love and to cherish till *death* do us part.” That’s quite sobering, isn’t it? But as the preacher of Ecclesiastes said, “It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart” (7:2).

So how does a consideration of the house of mourning change a marriage for the better? Let me share three important ways:

*A. Steward*

First, death reminds us that we are merely stewards of our spouses, not owners. As much as Joan pledged herself to me on our wedding day, she doesn’t belong to me. She belongs to Jesus. And one day I will need to give her back. In fact, if I *do* start acting as if she belongs to me, I will ruin much of what is precious about our marriage, just like I should never act as if my children belong to me. That coming day of separation in death should be an ever-present reminder that she is not mine.

In marriage, we are—as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 4 about ministry more generally—we are “servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover,” he writes, “it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.”

In marriage, God has entrusted one of his precious ones to you as your spouse. During the decades you hopefully have together, will you cling to them as an idol or seek God’s purposes for that stewardship, knowing that it is temporary? The knowledge that death is coming is part of what helps us view each other as gifts rather than idols.

In other words, the coming of death reminds me that my marriage isn’t about me. It isn’t about what I get out of it. This is because death isn’t the end of existence, but a change in existence. Because death is the great handing-off moment—handing a spouse back to Jesus, it reminds us that marriage is a stewardship. For him, not me.

That’s the perspective that guards us from valuing marriage for what we get out of it, which all too often is the slow death of a marriage. Richard Baxter wrote that one purpose of marriage is “To prepare each other for the approach of death, and comfort each other in the hopes of life eternal.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

What is my stewardship in marriage then? It is to encourage Joan toward faith. To help her be more like Christ through my encouragement and my prayer and my exhortation. It is to give her the opportunity to enjoy God in new ways through our relationship together that are preparing her for the heaven that awaits. Death means that marriage is not forever, that I’m not the owner. I’m simply a steward…for a time.

And that’s closely related to a second way that death reshapes a mindset for marriage:

*B. Savor*

Because marriage is temporary, we should savor it. Enjoy it. Love it. That’s what the Teacher says in Ecclesiastes. “Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life.” Ecclesiastes is full of exhortations to enjoy the temporary things that God has given us. That they’re temporary is what he means by “your vain life.” This is not cynicism about marriage; quite the contrary, it is realistic that marriage—like so much else in life—is passing away. And so part of how we serve God in this passing life is to enjoy what he’s given us—marriage perhaps most of all.

If marriage were merely about producing things for God, like kids and ministry, then the fact that this world is passing away would take the emphasis *off* of marriage and onto getting more done. But marriage is about portrayal, and one way it portrays the goodness of who God is, is when we enjoy it as a good gift from him. Death is approaching. So enjoy the wife whom you love (or husband whom you love). Not as a nihilistic “eat and drink for tomorrow we die” but the intensely meaningful “you have limited time to glorify God by enjoying this gift…so get on with it!!”

Remember that section of 1 Timothy we looked at the other week, where those who devote themselves to what Paul calls the “teachings of demons” *forbid* marriage and the enjoyment of food. Paul writes to strenuously disagree with them in 1 Timothy 4:4. “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.”

Death is coming. So enjoy your marriage. Enjoy it with thanksgiving to God. And in so doing, you will sanctify your enjoyment, turning enjoyment into worship. You will have all eternity to glorify God, but only these few years to glorify him by enjoying his gift of marriage. So savor it!

OK then, one last way that death changes our perspective toward marriage. It helps us to…

*C. See the eternal beauty that God is working into your spouse.*

When you get married, you discover weakness in your spouse. And as we talked about a few weeks ago, one thing you must not do is to disdain your spouse for their weakness. You must not even love them *despite* their weakness. Rather, you must love them *in* their weakness. The coming of death helps you do that. Because death is when the masterpiece that God has been creating in your spouse is at long last revealed.

Listen to Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:17. “For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”

Affliction—be it light and momentary or not—is a real obstacle for my agenda in life. So Paul calls me to look beyond this life, to those things that are unseen and eternal, so that I will treasure what God is building amidst and even through that affliction: an eternal weight of glory.

Similarly, the weakness of your spouse presents a real obstacle to your agenda in marriage, if your agenda is about the things marriage produces, the things you’ll get out of it. But turn your gaze instead to the portrait of Christ’s glory that God is painting in your spouse and you will have a different mindset entirely. From that perspective, death is the finish line. The great unveiling. You are the best human student of your spouse. You see all the promise. You see the beauty unfolding. And one day you will see all the glory of what God has done.

That’s why, 1 Thessalonians 4:13, we do not grieve as those who have no hope. Not merely because there is life after death. But because death marks the goal to which the labor of love that is marriage has been pointing.

Death reminds us that true love always points beyond itself, to the one who gave it.

It’s hard to grapple with marriage being temporary. Especially when marriage is sweet. I certainly feel that. It’s strange to think about being with Joan in eternity and *not* being married to her. I’ll certainly be putting in an application to get the mansion right next door.

But joking aside, I know by faith that all the goodness he’s shown us in marriage is but a shadow of what is to come. As sweet as this earthly relationship is, God intends it to merely point us forward with anticipation, as the appetizer—so to speak—for the feast of glory that is ours eternally in Christ.

*Any last questions?*

1. I suppose we could have a fourth category which is Jesus coming back but if that’s how your marriage ends, I think you’re going to be just fine without any teaching from this class. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This manuscript generally avoids the phrase “God hates divorce” because those words are not found in any major modern English translation of the Bible. They were in the 1984 NIV translation of Malachi 2:16, but this is not seem to be the best translation. Context in Malachi 2 makes it clear however that God is angered by divorce. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The marriage in view here is one where a woman becomes a man’s wife as his slave, and then he takes a second wife. This is of course foreign to us today and abhorrent. The argument from the lesser to the greater holds. If his man was bound to provide for this woman both physically and sexually, then how much more would this be true in a marriage under better circumstances? [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Richard Baxter, *Works* IV: 234, *The Poor Man’s Family Book.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)