

THROUGH THE
BIBLE



THROUGH THE
YEAR

~ DAILY REFLECTIONS ~
FROM GENESIS *to* REVELATION

John Stott



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Following the Christian Calendar

An Explanation

In 1963 a “Joint Liturgical Group” was formed in Britain, representing eight churches. Its unofficial report was entitled *The Calendar and Lectionary: A Reconsideration*. It proposed a calendar in which the Advent period (December) would focus on preparation for the first coming of Christ, without the awkwardness of trying to celebrate both his comings simultaneously. It would also extend backward toward the Sundays after Pentecost. In this way the cycle of the church’s year would be more or less complete.

Since then several further attempts have been made to provide the church with an agreed calendar and lectionary, particularly for public worship on Sundays.

My concern, however, is rather to offer a resource for daily private devotion. It should enable us, whether we belong to a so-called liturgical church or not, to recapitulate every year the whole biblical story from the creation in Genesis to the consummation in Revelation 22. Moreover, when the church’s year is conceived in this way, it divides itself naturally into three equal periods of four months each.

The first period runs from the beginning of September (when the Eastern Orthodox church year begins and when European churches hold their harvest festival) until Christmas. It enables us to relive the Old Testament story from the creation until the coming of Christ.

The second period runs from the beginning of January to the end of April, culminating in Whitsun, or Pentecost. It enables us to relive the story of Jesus in the Gospels, from his birth, through his ministry, to his death, resurrection, ascension, and gift of the Spirit.

The third period runs from the beginning of May to the end of August and consists of the weeks that follow Pentecost. It enables us to relive the story of the Acts and to recall that the Holy Spirit is both God's power for living now and his pledge of our final inheritance when Christ returns. During this period we reflect on the Christian life and the Christian hope as set forth in the Letters and the Revelation.

Thus the church calendar unfolds in three periods, the Bible divides itself into three sections, and Almighty God is seen to have revealed himself in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, these three threes may be superimposed on one another in a healthy trinitarian structure. It covers the whole biblical story. In period one (September to December), we reflect on the work of God the Father and on his preparation of his people through the Old Testament for the coming of the Messiah. In period two (January to April), we reflect on the work of God the Son and on his saving ministry as described in the Gospels. In period three (May to August), we reflect on the work of God the Holy Spirit and on his activity as documented in the Acts, the Letters, and the book of Revelation.

To recall, relive, and celebrate annually this divine story should lead us into a wholesome and balanced trinitarian faith, should increase our familiarity with the framework and content of the Bible, and should establish our confidence in the God of history who has been and still is working out his purpose before, during, and after the incarnate life of our Lord Jesus Christ until he comes in power and glory.

A Note to the Reader

The text of *Through the Bible, Through the Year* is organized in such a way that the user can start reading at any of its three parts.

For example, it is natural to begin with "Creation" at week 1 (in September) and follow the biblical story from its beginning to its end.

But some readers will prefer to wait until December/January so as to begin with "The Nativity" at week 17.

A third option is to begin with Easter in March/April. Since the date of Easter is movable (within the five weeks between March 22 and April 25), it is not possible to fix it, or to fix the other great Christian festivals which find their place in relation to Easter Day.

The best way to keep in step with the Christian calendar is to pinpoint the date of Easter in the year in which you are using this book. Then during the two weeks before it (Passion Week and Holy Week) we can read the meditations set for Week 31 (“The Seven Words from the Cross”) and Week 32 (“The Meaning of the Cross”). On Easter Day itself, and during the remaining days of Easter Week, we can then read the meditations for Week 33 (“The Resurrection Appearances”), and during the following week the meditations set for Week 34 (“The Significance of the Resurrection”).

This will ensure that during the vital weeks before and after Easter Week we will be reading appropriate texts and reflections. It will also be possible for us to fit dislodged and left-over weeks into the remaining gaps, and to observe Ascension Day (forty days after Easter) and Pentecost Sunday (ten days later still). Trinity Sunday is the climax; it is always the Sunday after Pentecost.

P A R T I

FROM CREATION TO CHRIST

*An Overview of the Old Testament
(The Life of Israel)*

— SEPTEMBER TO DECEMBER —

There is an inherent problem in the fact that the secular year begins on January 1, whereas the Christian year begins with Advent (in late November or early December).

Moreover, in this calendar I am pushing Advent back a further three months, partly in order to give us a much longer period of preparation for Christmas and partly in order to divide the year into three equal periods of four months each. Then it is marvelous to have four months in which to cover the whole Old Testament, stretching from creation to Christ.

We naturally focus during week 1 on Genesis 1, the creation. If, however, the reader prefers to begin the New Year with the birth of Christ it is easily possible to do so.

Week 1: Creation

“Nothing is more beautiful than Genesis,” wrote Luther, “nothing more useful.” I think we should agree with his evaluation, for there is great beauty and great practical usefulness in this book. Here, especially in its early chapters, the great doctrines of the Bible are established—the sovereignty of God as Creator, the power of his word, the original nobility of man, male and female, made in his image and given stewardship of the earth, the equality and complementarity of the sexes, the goodness of creation, the dignity of work and the rhythm of rest. These central truths are all laid down at the beginning of Genesis like massive foundation stones on which the biblical superstructure is built.

- Sunday:** The Creator’s Initiative
- Monday:** From Chaos to Cosmos
- Tuesday:** Light out of Darkness
- Wednesday:** The Sobriety of the Genesis Narrative
- Thursday:** The Image of God
- Friday:** Human Sexuality
- Saturday:** The Sabbath Rest

The Creator's Initiative

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

Genesis 1:1

The first four words of the Bible (“In the beginning God”) are an indispensable introduction to the whole. They tell us that we can never anticipate God or take him by surprise. For he is always there “in the beginning.” The initiative in every action lies with him.

This is especially true of creation. Christians believe that when God began his creative work, nothing existed except him. Only he was there in the beginning. Only he is eternal. The God-centeredness of Genesis 1 stands out prominently in the narrative. God is the subject of nearly every verb. “God said” occurs ten times and “God saw that it was [very] good” seven times.

We do not have to choose between Genesis 1 and contemporary cosmology or astrophysics. For the Bible was never intended by God to be a scientific textbook. Indeed, it should be evident to readers that Genesis 1 is a highly stylized and beautiful poem. Both accounts of creation (scientific and poetic) are true, but they are given from different perspectives and are complementary to one another.

When the Apostles' Creed affirms our belief in “God the Father Almighty,” it is referring not so much to his omnipotence as to his control over what he has made. What he created he sustains. He is immanent in his world, continuously upholding, animating, and ordering all things. The breath of living creatures is in his hand. He causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall. He feeds the birds and clothes the flowers. Again, it is poetry, but it is true.

Hence the wisdom of churches that hold an annual Service of Harvest Thanksgiving and of Christians who say grace before meals. It is both right and helpful thus regularly to acknowledge our dependence for life and all things on our faithful Creator and Sustainer.

FOR FURTHER READING: MATTHEW 5:43-45 AND 6:25-34

From Chaos to Cosmos

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

Genesis 1:2

Although Isaiah assures us that God “did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited” (Isa. 45:18), the earth was at first empty, formless, dark, and uninhabitable. So stage by stage in Genesis 1 we watch God reducing disorder to order, chaos to cosmos. The author of Genesis evidently understood that the creation was a process, although of unspecified length.

This process is vividly portrayed in verse 2. Some translators understand it as referring to an impersonal phenomenon such as a storm at sea. The New Jerusalem Bible, for instance, renders it that there was “a divine wind sweeping over the waters.” But I agree with other commentators that in the context the reference is not to the wind but to the personal Holy Spirit himself whose creative activity is likened to a bird hovering over its young (REB).

Further, to the work of the Spirit of God in creation the author adds an allusion to the Word of God: “And God said.” “For he spoke, and it came to be” (Ps. 33:9). It does not seem to me fanciful to detect here a reference to God the Father, to his Word, and to his Spirit. In other words, to the Trinity.

In these days of frequent overemphasis on one or other of the persons of the Godhead, it is healthy to keep returning to the three persons. Indeed, it is important to note that from the very earliest verses, the Bible affirms its witness to the Trinity. At the beginning of our studies we rejoice to acknowledge that we are trinitarian Christians.

FOR FURTHER READING: PSALM 104:29-31

Light out of Darkness

And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.

Genesis 1:3

The little territory of Israel was sandwiched between the mighty empires of Babylon to their north and Egypt to their south, and in both countries some form of the worship of sun, moon, and stars was popular. In Egypt the center of sun worship was On, whose Greek name was Heliopolis, “the city of the sun,” a few miles outside Cairo. In Babylon astronomers had already developed elaborate calculations of the movements of the five planets they knew and had begun to map the heavens.

It is not altogether surprising, therefore, that many Israelite leaders became contaminated with the astral cults that surrounded them. Ezekiel was horrified to see twenty-five men “with their backs toward the temple of the LORD and their faces toward the east . . . bowing down to the sun in the east” (Ezek. 8:16).

Jeremiah also condemned the leaders of the nation for loving and serving “the sun and the moon and all the stars of the heavens” (Jer. 8:2).

It is against this background of idolatry that Genesis 1 needs to be read and understood. The Egyptians and the Babylonians were worshiping the sun, the moon, and the stars; the author of Genesis insists that they are not gods to be worshiped but the creation of the one true God.

God promised Abraham descendants “as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore” (Gen. 22:17). The extraordinary thing is that, with our knowledge of about one hundred billion stars in our galaxy, and of billions more galaxies billions of light-years away, the equivalence of sand and stars may well be fairly accurate.

The apostle Paul took God’s majestic fiat “Let there be light” as a model of what happens in the new creation. He likens the unregenerate human heart to the dark primeval chaos and the new birth to God’s creative command, “Let there be light.” This had certainly been his own experience. “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

FOR FURTHER READING: 2 CORINTHIANS 4:3–6

The Sobriety of the Genesis Narrative

And God said, “Let there be. . . .” And it was so. . . . And God saw that it was good.

Genesis 1:6, 9–10

It is often claimed that there are striking parallels between the creation myths of the ancient Near East (especially the Babylonian epic known as “Enuma Elish”) and the biblical account of creation in Genesis 1. But what is remarkable about the Babylonian and the biblical stories is not their similarity but their dissimilarity. So far from copying the Babylonian account, Genesis 1 critiques and challenges its basic theology. In the Babylonian myths the gods, amoral and capricious, squabble and fight with one another. Marduk, the loftiest of gods, attacks and kills Tiamat, the mother-goddess. He then proceeds to split her body in two, half of it becoming the sky and the other half the earth. From this crude polytheism it is a relief to turn to the ethical monotheism of Genesis 1, in which the whole creation is attributed to the command of the one true and holy God.

According to the book of Revelation, the eternal worship of heaven focuses on the Creator:

You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being.

Revelation 4:11

Scientists will continue to investigate the origins, nature, and development of the universe. But, theologically speaking, it is enough for us to know that God created all things by his will as expressed in his simple and majestic Word. For this is the repeated refrain of Genesis 1: “And God said. . . .” Moreover, as God contemplated what he had made, he “saw that it was good.” We need, therefore, to rejoice in all God’s created works—whether food and drink; or marriage and family; or art and music; or birds, beasts, and butterflies; and many other things besides.

For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.

1 Timothy 4:4

FOR FURTHER READING: JEREMIAH 10:12–16

The Image of God

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him.

Genesis 1:27

The climax of God's creative activity was the appearance of human beings, and the way in which Genesis expresses this high point is to describe them as having been created "in the image of God." But scholars are not altogether agreed on what the divine image in human beings means.

Some think it means that human beings are God's representatives, exercising dominion over the rest of creation in his place. Others conclude that God's image alludes to the special relationship that he has established between himself and us. But if we see the expression both in its immediate context in Genesis and in the broader perspective of Scripture, it seems to refer to all those human qualities or capacities that render us unlike the animals and like God. What are these?

Firstly, we human beings are rational and self-conscious. Secondly, we are moral, having a conscience that urges us to do what we perceive to be right. Thirdly, we are creative like our Creator, able to appreciate what is beautiful to the ear and the eye. Fourthly, we are social, able to establish with one another authentic relationships of love. For God is love, and by making us in his own image, he has given us the capacity to love him and others. Fifthly, we have a spiritual faculty that makes us hunger after God. Thus we are uniquely able to think and to choose, to create, to love, and to worship.

Unfortunately, however, we have to add that the image of God in us has been defaced, so that every part of our humanness has been tainted with self-centeredness. Yet God's image has not been destroyed. On the contrary, both the Old Testament and the New Testament affirm that human beings still bear God's image and that this is the reason why we must respect them. The sanctity of human life arises from the value of God's image bearers (9:6). Human beings are Godlike beings. They deserve to be loved and served.

FOR FURTHER READING: JAMES 3:7-12

Human Sexuality

So God created man in his own image . . . ; male and female he created them.

Genesis 1:27

It is a beautiful truth, clearly affirmed from the first chapter of the Bible onward, that heterosexuality is God's purpose in creation and that men and women are equal in dignity and worth before God their Creator. Both were created in his image (v. 27), and both were blessed and told to be fruitful, to subdue the earth, and to care for its creatures (v. 28). Thus men and women are equal bearers of the divine image and equal sharers in the earthly stewardship. And nothing that may be said later (e.g., in Genesis 2) must be allowed to undermine, let alone contradict, this fundamental equality of the sexes. What creation has established no culture is able to destroy. True, equality does not mean identity. Although the sexes are equal, they are different; equality is fully compatible with complementarity.

And something more needs to be said. Although our human disobedience and fall upset our human sexual relationships, God's intention is to restore and even deepen them through the gospel. Thus Paul could write to the Galatian Christians, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). This does not mean that ethnic, social, and sexual differences are eradicated by Christ. No, men are still men, and women are still women. But in Christ, when we are personally related to him, our sexual distinctives constitute no barrier to fellowship with God or with each other. For we are still equal before him, equally justified by faith, and equally indwelt by his Spirit.

Men and women in the Christian community should honor and value one another more than they do in non-Christian society. For we recognize our status. We are equal by creation, and even more equal (if there can be degrees in equality!) by redemption.

FOR FURTHER READING: GENESIS 2:18-25

The Sabbath Rest

God . . . rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

Genesis 2:3

What was the crown of God's creation? It was not the creation of man but the provision of the Sabbath, not the commissioning of man to take up his tools and work for six days but his commission to lay them down and worship on the seventh day. God's plan was not only to create *homo faber* (man the worker) but to create *homo adorans* (man the worshiper). For human beings are seen at their noblest when they are worshipping God.

This divine purpose was later enshrined in the Decalogue, whose fourth commandment said, "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy," that is, by setting it apart from other days for both rest and worship (Exod. 20:8). God knew what he was doing when he made provision for our rest of mind and body. Several attempts have been made to change the divine rhythm of one day in seven. The French revolutionaries introduced a republican calendar with a ten-day week, but Napoleon in 1805 restored the seven-day week. Then the Russian revolutionaries turned Sunday into a working day, but it did not last long. Stalin restored Sunday as a day of rest. God knows best.

Then, secondly, one day in seven was intended for worship. Although some Christians insist on observing the seventh day as the Sabbath, it seems that the early believers worshiped on the first day, to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ (John 20:19, 26; Acts 20:7), and that the important consideration is not which day is observed but that the one-day-in-seven rhythm is maintained.

Jesus himself observed the Sabbath and taught his disciples to do the same. But he also laid down an important principle: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Sunday observance is meant not to be dreary and restrictive but rather to be a joyful weekly celebration in which we make time for rest, worship, and (we should add) the family.

FOR FURTHER READING: DEUTERONOMY 5:12-15

Week 2: The Institution of Work and Marriage

It is in God's good providence that we have been given two accounts of creation, which complement one another. Both focus on the creation of human beings. Yet there is a significant difference between them. In Genesis 1 the Creator, who is named "God," upholds the whole cosmos, while in Genesis 2 he is given his covenant name, "the LORD God," who enjoys intimate fellowship with his human creatures. In particular, two foundation stones for human life on earth are laid in Genesis 2, namely work and marriage. Both are seen as the loving provision of Yahweh.

- Sunday:** Keeping Sunday Special
- Monday:** Collaborating with God
- Tuesday:** Caring for Creation
- Wednesday:** True Freedom
- Thursday:** Man as Male and Female
- Friday:** The Creation of Eve
- Saturday:** The Biblical Definition of Marriage

Keeping Sunday Special

God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.

Genesis 2:3

What does it mean that God “blessed” the seventh day and sanctified it or “made it holy?” Clearly the day itself has not experienced any inherent change; only its use has changed. For God has set it apart from the other six days of the week for special purposes.

In 1985 in the United Kingdom a campaign was launched called “Keep Sunday Special.” It stressed the need to protect the workforce from being obliged to work on Sundays in any but essential jobs. At the same time it sought to safeguard Sunday for rest and recreation, worship and family. It nearly succeeded. It has now been refocused to ensure that everybody has “a regular shared day off.”

This campaign has nothing in common with repressive sabbatarianism. The rabbis in Jesus’s day calculated that the law of Sabbath observance contained more than fifteen hundred regulations. But Jesus had no sympathy with such casuistry. Claiming to be “Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:28), he meant that he had the authority to give a true interpretation of the fourth commandment. It was always right to “do good” on the Sabbath day (Mark 3:4), he said. He would have been in full agreement with the divine sentiments expressed in Isaiah 58:13–14:

If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath
and from doing as you please on my holy day,
if you call the Sabbath a delight
and the LORD’s holy day honorable, . . .
then you will find your joy in the LORD,
and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land
and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.

FOR FURTHER READING: MARK 2:23–28

Collaborating with God

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

Genesis 2:15

I've got the Monday morning blues," we sometimes say in a melancholy tone of voice. It is a common human experience. But after enjoying the refreshment that the rest and worship of Sunday brings, we should be eager for the beginning of the working week. We should exclaim in the words of Mark Greene's well-known book, *Thank God It's Monday!*

What we need is an authentic Christian philosophy of work. Too many Christians see their work as no more than a painful necessity, since we have to earn our living somehow. By contrast, I think we should imagine Adam (evidently a neolithic farmer) going to work each day in the Garden of Eden with energy and enthusiasm. For God put the man he had made into the garden he had planted, in order "to work it and take care of it" (v. 15). Thus God deliberately humbled himself to need Adam's cooperation. Of course, he could have done all the work himself. After all, he had planted the garden. So presumably he could have managed it too! But he chose not to.

I like the story of the Cockney gardener who was showing a clergyman around his magnificent herbaceous borders, which were in full bloom. The clergyman broke into the praise of God, until the gardener was fed up that he was receiving no credit. "You should 'ave seen this 'ere garden," he complained, "when Gawd 'ad it to 'isself!" His theology was entirely correct. Without the human worker, the garden would have been a wilderness.

We need, then, to make an important distinction between nature and culture. Nature is what God gives us; culture is what we make of it (agriculture, horticulture, etc.). Nature is raw materials; culture is commodities prepared for the market. Nature is divine creation; culture is human cultivation. God invites us to share in his work. Indeed, our work becomes a privilege when we see it as collaboration with God.

FOR FURTHER READING: GENESIS 2:7-9, 15

Caring for Creation

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image . . . and let them rule [“have dominion” (REB)] over . . . all the earth. . . .” God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.”

Genesis 1:26, 28

In March 2005 the results of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment were published. It was a scientifically rigorous analysis of the conditions for human well-being on planet Earth. “We are living beyond our means,” it declared, rapidly consuming, depleting, polluting, and destroying the “natural capital” on which our own livelihood depends.

Christians should be in the vanguard of the conservation movement, because we believe that God has called us to care for his creation. To be sure, some people blame us not only for not solving the ecological crisis but for actually causing it. In particular, one critic has seized on what he has called “three horrifying lines” in Genesis 1 and “this ghastly, calamitous text.”¹ He was referring to the statements that God had given humankind the commission to “rule” and “subdue” the earth.

It is quite true that the first of these two verbs in Hebrew can mean to “trample on” and that the second was used for bringing people into subjection. Was Ian McHarg right, then, in his accusation? No, he was not. It is an elementary principle of biblical interpretation that the context must be allowed to determine the meaning of the text. We must note, therefore, that the “dominion” God has given us is a delegated and responsible stewardship. It would be ludicrous to suppose that, having first created the earth, God then handed it over to us to destroy it. It is the care of creation, not its exploitation, to which we have been called.

FOR FURTHER READING: GENESIS 1:26–31

1. Ian McHarg, Dunning Trust Lectures, quoted in the *Ontario Naturalist*, March 1973.

True Freedom

And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”

Genesis 2:16–17

God gave Adam two simple and straightforward instructions—one positive and the other negative. The first was a liberal permission (he might eat from any and every tree in the garden). The second was a single prohibition (he must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which was in the middle of the garden).

The liberal permission gave an almost completely unfettered access to the rich variety of trees in the garden. They were both “pleasing to the eye” and “good for food” (v. 9), thus offering Adam and Eve aesthetic and material satisfaction. God’s generous provision also included access to “the tree of life,” symbolic of continuous fellowship with God, which is eternal life (see John 17:3) and is glimpsed in the later statement that the Lord God himself walked with them in the garden (Gen. 3:8).

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil referred to in the solitary prohibition is so called not because it had magical properties but because it stood for the probation on which Adam and Eve had been placed. Created in God’s image, they already had a degree of moral discernment, but if they disobeyed God, they would have a disastrous experience of evil as well as good.

A Finnish student at the University of Helsinki once said to me, “I’m longing for freedom, and I’m getting more free since I gave up God.” But true freedom is found not in discarding Christ’s yoke but in submitting to it, that is, through refraining from what he has forbidden us. Obedience means life, and disobedience death.

FOR FURTHER READING: MATTHEW 11:28–30

Man as Male and Female

The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him” [or “as his partner” (NRSV)].

Genesis 2:18

Attentive readers are likely to be rudely awakened by Genesis 2:18. Six times in the creation narrative of Genesis 1 we come across the refrain “and God saw that it was good.” Then follows the conclusion that “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (v. 31).

But now suddenly we read of something that is “not good.” How can there be anything that is “not good” in God’s good creation? Answer: it is not good for man to be alone, for man without woman is incomplete.

Mind you, we must not press this into an absolute statement, for some people are called to singleness, as the apostle Paul made plain (1 Cor. 7:7). Besides, Jesus our Lord, although the perfection of humanness, was himself single, which indicates that it is possible to be human and single at the same time! (See Matt. 19:11–12.)

Nevertheless, returning to Genesis 2, we read that God determined to give Adam a partner corresponding to him. Although the two Hebrew words used here have been variously translated, they combine the concepts of partnership and suitability. They supply no basis for either of the two extremes of male supremacy (men ruling over women) or radical feminism (women dispensing with men). Nor do they make room for gay or lesbian partnerships.

It would be a mistake, however, to restrict the application of Genesis 2:18 to marriage. Calvin was one of many commentators who have seen its wider reference. “Solitude is not good,” he wrote. It is not good for any human beings to be alone. God has made us social beings. Friendship is a precious gift of God.

FOR FURTHER READING: GENESIS 2:18–25

The Creation of Eve

The LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

Genesis 2:21–22

How literally we are intended to understand the divine surgery under a divine anaesthetic is not clear. But something profound and mysterious took place, which prompted Adam at the sight of Eve to break out into history's first love poem:

This is now ["at last" (REB)] bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called "woman,"
for she was taken out of man.

verse 23

That she was taken out of his side has been seen by commentators to have symbolic significance. Peter Lombard, who became bishop of Paris in 1159, for example, wrote a year or two earlier in his famous summary of Christian doctrine entitled *The Book of Sentences*, "Eve was not taken from the feet of Adam to be his slave, nor from his head to be his lord, but from his side to be his partner." And Matthew Henry, who began his biblical commentary in 1704, may have been elaborating Peter Lombard when he wrote that Eve was "not made out of his head to top him, not out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved."

It is right, therefore, that in virtually all societies, marriage is a recognized and regulated institution. But it is not a human invention. Christian teaching on marriage begins with the joyful affirmation that it is God's idea, not ours. As the Preface to the 1662 Marriage Service says, it was "instituted by God himself in the time of man's innocency."

FOR FURTHER READING: SONG OF SONGS 2:14–17

The Biblical Definition of Marriage

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

Genesis 2:24

Marriage is under such threat in the western world today that it is good to be reminded of its biblical basis. Genesis 2:24 is the Bible's own definition of marriage; it is even more important because it was endorsed by the Lord Jesus Christ (Mark 10:7). It is a relationship with five facets.

1. *Heterosexual*. It unites a man and his wife. A homosexual partnership can never be a legitimate alternative.
2. *Monogamous*. "A man" and "his wife" are both in the singular. Polygamy may have been tolerated for a while in Old Testament days, but monogamy was God's purpose from the beginning.
3. *Committed*. When a man leaves his parents to marry, he must "cleave" to his wife, sticking to her like glue (as the New Testament equivalent implies). Divorce may be permitted in one or two defined situations. "But it was not this way from the beginning," Jesus insisted (Matt. 19:8). Also, what is missing in cohabitation is precisely the element of commitment, which is foundational to marriage.
4. *Public*. Before the "cleaving" of marriage there should be the "leaving" of parents, and the "leaving" in mind is a public social occasion. Family, friends, and society have a right to know what is happening.
5. *Physical*. "They will become one flesh." On the one hand, heterosexual marriage is the only God-given context for sexual union and the procreation of children, and on the other, sexual union is so much a constitutive element of marriage that willful non-consummation is in many societies a ground for its annulment. Certainly Adam and Eve experienced no embarrassment regarding sex. "The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame" (Gen 2:25).

Thus marriage, according to God's purpose in its institution, is a heterosexual and monogamous union that involves the loving, lifelong commitment of each to the other, should be entered upon by a public leaving of parents, and should be consummated in sexual union.

FOR FURTHER READING: EPHESIANS 5:21-33