

THIS
MOMENTARY
MARRIAGE

A Parable of Permanence



JOHN PIPER



This Momentary Marriage

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INTRODUCTION: MARRIAGE AND MARTYRDOM

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was engaged to be married to Maria von Wedemeyer when he was hanged at dawn on April 9, 1945, at the age of thirty-nine. As a young pastor in Germany, he had been opposed to Nazism and was finally arrested on April 5, 1943, for his involvement in a conspiracy to assassinate Adolf Hitler.

So he never married. He skipped the shadow on the way to the Reality. Some are called to one kind of display of the worth of Christ, some to another. Martyrdom, not marriage, was his calling.

Being married in the moment of death is both a sweet and bitter providence. Sweet because at the precipice of eternity the air is crystal-clear, and you see more plainly than ever the precious things that really matter about your imperfect lover. But being married at death is also bitter, because the suffering is doubled as one watches the other die, or even quadrupled if both are dying. And more if there is a child.

ONE FLESH EVEN IN DEATH

That was the case with John and Betty Stam. They were missionaries with China Inland Mission. Having met each other at Moody Bible Institute, they sailed for China separately—she in 1931, he a year later. They were married by Reuben A. Torrey on October 25, 1933, in Tsinan. John was twenty-six; Betty was twenty-seven.

The region was already dangerous because of the civil war between the Chinese Nationalist Party and the Chinese Communist Party. On September 11, 1934, Helen Priscilla was born. Three months later, her parents were beheaded by the Communists on a hill outside Miaosheo, while tiny Helen lay hidden where her mother left her with ten dollars in her blanket.

Geraldine Taylor, the daughter-in-law of Hudson Taylor (the founder of the China Inland Mission), published the story of the Stams' martyrdom two years after their death. Every time I read it, the compounding of the preciousness and the pain by the marriage and the baby make me weep.

Never was that little one more precious than when they looked their last on her baby sweetness, as they were roughly summoned the next morning and led out to die. . . . Painfully bound with ropes, their hands behind them, stripped of their outer garments, and John barefooted (he had given Betty his socks to wear), they passed down the street where he was known to many, while the Reds shouted their ridicule and called the people to come and see the execution.

Like their Master, they were led up a little hill outside the town. There, in a clump of pine trees, the Communists harangued the unwilling onlookers, too terror-stricken to utter protest—But no, one broke the ranks! The doctor of the place and a Christian, he expressed the feelings of many when he fell on his knees and pleaded for the life of his friends. Angrily repulsed by the Reds, he still persisted, until he was dragged away as a prisoner, to suffer death when it appeared that he too was a follower of Christ.

John had turned to the leader of the band, asking mercy for this man. When he was sharply ordered to kneel—and the look of joy on his face, afterwards, told of the unseen Presence with them as his spirit was released—Betty was seen to quiver, but only for a moment. Bound as she was, she fell on her knees beside him. A quick command, the flash of a sword which mercifully she did not see—and they were reunited.¹

NOTHING IS LOST

Yes, they were reunited, but not as husband and wife. For Jesus said, “When they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Mark 12:25). There is no human marriage after death. The shadow of covenant-keeping between husband and wife gives way to the reality of covenant-keeping

¹Mrs. Howard Taylor, *The Triumph of John and Betty Stam* (Philadelphia: China Inland Mission, 1936), 107–108. The child had been hidden and was found by Christians and saved.

between Christ and his glorified Church. Nothing is lost. The music of every pleasure is transposed into an infinitely higher key.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and John and Betty Stam today are closer to each other in love than John and Betty Stam were, or Dietrich and Maria would have been, in marriage. They “shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matt. 13:43). Their magnificent perfection points to the glory of Christ. And in the age to come, their bodies will be restored, and all creation will join with the children of God in everlasting joy (Rom. 8:21).

AS THE CROWN MAKES THE KING, MARRIAGE MAKES ONE

The month after Bonhoeffer’s imprisonment, and two years before his death, Bonhoeffer wrote from the military section of the prison at Tegel, Berlin, “A Wedding Sermon from a Prison Cell.” His text was Ephesians 1:12: “. . . so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.”

Marriage is more than your love for each other. . . . In your love you see only the heaven of your own happiness, but in marriage you are placed at a post of responsibility towards the world and mankind. Your love is your own private possession, but marriage is more than something personal—it is a status, and office. Just as it is the crown, and not merely the will to rule, that makes the king, so it is marriage, and not merely your love for each other, that joins you together in the sight of God and man.²

The aim of this book is to enlarge your vision of what marriage is. As Bonhoeffer says, it is more than your love for each other. Vastly more. Its meaning is infinitely great. I say that with care. The meaning of marriage is the display of the covenant-keeping love between Christ and his people.

This covenant-keeping love reached its climax in the death of

²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 27. All the quotes from Bonhoeffer on the facing pages of each chapter of this book were taken from *Letters and Papers from Prison*; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (London: SCM Press, 1954); Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

Christ for his church, his bride. That death was the ultimate expression of grace, which is the ultimate expression of God's glory, which is of infinite value. Therefore, when Paul says that our great and final destiny is "the praise of [God's] glorious grace" (Eph. 1:6), he elevates marriage beyond measure, for here, uniquely, God displays the apex of the glory of his grace: "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25).

A STRANGE WAY TO START A BOOK ON MARRIAGE

Thinking about martyrdom may seem like a strange way to begin a book on marriage. If we lived in a different world, and had a different Bible, I might think it strange. But here is what I read.

Let those who have wives live as though they had none.
(1 Cor. 7:29)

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26)

"Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life." (Luke 18:29–30)

I take those verses to mean: Marriage is a good gift of God, but the world is fallen, and sin abounds, and obedience is costly, and suffering is to be expected, and "a person's enemies will be those of his own household" (Matt. 10:36). High romance and passionate sexual intimacy and precious children may come. But hold them loosely—as though you were not holding them. This is what Bonhoeffer represents. To keep his life and meaning before us throughout this book, I will let him speak briefly on the facing pages at the beginning of each chapter.

Romance, sex, and childbearing are temporary gifts of God. They are not part of the next life. And they are not guaranteed even for this

life. They are one possible path along the narrow way to Paradise. Marriage passes through breathtaking heights and through swamps with choking vapors. It makes many things sweeter, and with it come bitter providences.

WE MADE IT

Marriage is a momentary gift. I have only scratched the surface of its wonders and its wounds. I hope that you will go farther and deeper and higher. As this book is published, Noël and I are passing our fortieth anniversary of marriage. She is God's gift to me—far better than I deserve. We speak often of the wonder of being married till one of us dies. It has not been trouble-free. So we imagine ourselves in our seventies or eighties—when divorce is not only sin, but socially silly—sitting across from each other, perhaps at Old Country Buffet, and smiling at each other's wrinkled faces, and saying with the deepest gratitude for God's grace: "We made it."

To those who are just beginning, I simply join Dietrich Bonhoeffer in saying,

"Welcome one another . . . for the glory of God." That is God's word for your marriage. Thank him for it; thank him for leading you thus far; ask him to establish your marriage, to confirm it, sanctify it, and preserve it. So your marriage will be "for the praise of his glory." Amen.³

³*Letters and Papers from Prison*, 32.

FORGIVING AND FORBEARING

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.

COLOSSIANS 3:12-19



Recall that there are at least three reasons my wife was right when she said, “You cannot say too often that marriage is a model of Christ and the church” (cf. Eph. 5:31–32). One was that saying this about marriage lifts it out of the sitcom sewer and elevates it into the bright, clear sky of God’s glory where it is meant to be. Another was that saying this about marriage places it firmly on the basis of grace. By grace Christ *took* the church to be his bride in the first place, and by grace he *sustains* her. If marriage models that, it will be full of grace. This will be its ground and its glory. The third reason that we should stress often that marriage is a model of Christ and the church is that it profoundly

shapes the way we understand headship and submission. We will deal with this in Chapters 6–8.

HUMAN MARRIAGE WILL VANISH

The first two chapters of this book were meant to support that first reason. I tried to show that marriage is the *doing* of God and the *display* of God—especially his grace. That is its glory—marriage is from him and through him and to him. This is the bright, clear sky of God’s glory where marriage was meant to be.

Another way to see this is to recall that human marriage is temporary. To be sure, it points to something eternal, namely, Christ and the church. But when this age is over, it will vanish into the superior reality to which it points.

Jesus said in Matthew 22:30, “In the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.” This is why my father, Bill Piper, will not be a bigamist in the resurrection. Both my mother and my stepmother have died. My father had a thirty-six-year marriage with my mother and, after her death, a twenty-five-year marriage with my stepmother. But in the resurrection, the shadow gives way to the reality. My father will not be married in heaven, either to my mother or to my stepmother. Marriage is a pointer toward the glory of Christ and the church. But in the resurrection the pointer vanishes into the perfection of that glory.

BENDING GRACE FROM VERTICAL TO HORIZONTAL

Then the point in Chapter 3 was that marriage is based on grace—the vertical experience of grace from Christ through his death on the cross, and then that very grace bent out horizontally from husband to wife and from wife to husband. Colossians 2:14 tells us how God provided a basis for the forgiveness of our sins: “. . . by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.” The record of debt that mounts up against us because of our sin God set aside by nailing it to the cross—and the point, of course, is not that nails and wood take away sin, but that the pierced hands and feet of the Son of God take away sin (see Isa. 53:5–6).

Having shown us the basis of God's forgiveness in the cross, Paul then says in Colossians 3:13, "As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive." In other words, take the forgiveness and justification that you have received vertically through the death of Christ and bend it out horizontally to others. Specifically, husbands to wives and wives to husbands.

WHY THE FOCUS ON FORGIVENESS?

I asked the question near the end of Chapter 3: Why this emphasis on forgiving and forbearing rather than, say, on romance and enjoying each other? I gave three answers: 1) because there is going to be conflict based on sin, we need to forgive *sin* and forbear *strangeness*, and sometimes you won't even agree on which is which; 2) because the hard, rugged work of forgiving and forbearing is what makes it possible for affections to flourish when they seem to have died; and 3) because God gets glory when two very different and very imperfect people forge a life of faithfulness in the furnace of affliction by relying on Christ.

TO SPARE YOU SEPARATION

So in this chapter, I want to deal more thoroughly with forbearing and forgiving. Let me say at the outset that I am aware—painfully aware—that there are sins that spouses commit against each other that can push forbearance and forgiveness across the line into the assisting of sin and may even warrant a redemptive separation—I choose the words carefully: a *redemptive separation*. I am thinking of things like assault, adultery, child abuse, drunken rage, addictive gambling or theft or lying that brings the family to ruin.

My aim in this chapter is not to talk about these—that will come later when we take up the topic of separation and divorce and remarriage. Here I am trying to describe a biblical pattern of forbearance and forgiveness that can keep you from reaching the point of separation, and maybe even bring some of you back from the brink—perhaps even restore some marriages that the world calls "divorced." And I pray this will also sow seeds in single people who may one day be married, so that you will build your marriage on this rock of grace.

THE FOUNDATION: THE PERSON AND WORK OF CHRIST

When Paul gets to Colossians 3:12, he has laid a massive foundation in the person and work of Christ on the cross. This is the foundation of marriage and all of life. The main battles in life and in marriage are battles to believe this person and this work. I mean *really* believe it—trust it, embrace it, cherish it, treasure it, bank on it, breathe it, shape your life by it. So when Paul gets to Colossians 3:12, he exhorts us with words that are explosive with emotion-awakening reality built on Christ and his saving work.

First there are three descriptions of you, the believer, that Paul uses to help you receive his exhortation. “Put on then, as God’s *chosen ones, holy and beloved* . . .” He is about to tell us what kind of heart and attitude we should have—putting it on like a garment. But first he calls us *chosen, holy, loved*.

Chosen

We are God’s elect. Before the foundation of the world, God chose us in Christ. You can hear how precious this is to Paul with his words from Romans 8:33: “Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect?” The answer is that absolutely nobody can make a charge stick against God’s elect. Paul wants us to feel the wonder of being elect as being invincibly loved. If you resist the truth of election, you resist being loved in the fullness and the sweetness of God’s love.

Holy

Then he calls us *holy*—that is, set apart for God. He chose us for a purpose—to be his holy people. To come out of the world and not be common or unclean anymore. Ephesians 1:4: “He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be *holy*.” First Peter 2:9: “You are a chosen race . . . a *holy* nation.” This is first a position and a destiny before it is a pattern of behavior. That is why he is telling us the kind of behavior to “put on.” He knows we are not there yet, practically. He is calling us to *become* holy in life because we *are* holy in Christ. Dress to fit who you are. Wear holiness.

Loved

Then he calls us *loved*. “God’s *chosen ones, holy and beloved*.” If you are a believer in Christ, God, the maker of the universe, chose you, set you apart for himself, and loves you. He is for you and not against you. “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8).

SEE AND SAVOR THESE THREE WONDERS

This is the beginning of how husbands and wives forbear and forgive. They are blown away by being *chosen, set apart, and loved* by God. Husbands, devote yourselves to seeing and savoring this. Wives, do the same. Get your life from this. Get your joy from this. Get your hope from this—that you are *chosen, set apart, and loved* by God. Plead with the Lord that this would be the heartbeat of your life and your marriage.

On this basis now—on the basis of this profound, new, God-centered identity as chosen, holy, and loved—we are told what to “put on.” That is, we are told what kind of attitude and behavior fits with, and flows from, being chosen, set apart, and loved by God through Christ.

Paul shows us that there are three *inward* conditions that lead in turn to three *outward* demeanors. “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other.” We will break it down into pairs: compassionate hearts and kindness, humility and meekness, patience and forbearance (and forgiveness).

From Bowels of Mercy to Kindness

“Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, *compassionate hearts, kindness*” (Col. 3:12). “Compassionate hearts” is a modern translation of the phrase “bowels of mercy.” “Bowels of mercy” is the inward condition, and “kindness” is the outward demeanor. Be merciful in your inmost being, and then out of that good ground grows the fruit of kindness.

So husbands, sink your roots by faith into Christ through the gospel until you become a more merciful person. Wives, sink your roots by faith into Christ through the gospel until you become a more merciful person. And then treat each other out of this tender mercy with kindness. The battle is with our own unmerciful inner person. Fight that battle by faith, through the gospel, in prayer. Be stunned and broken and built up and made glad and merciful because you are chosen, holy, loved.

From Humility to Meekness

The next pair is “humility, meekness.” Verse 12: “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, *humility, meekness* . . .” Literally, “lowliness, meekness.” Again “lowliness” is the inward condition, and “meekness” is the outward demeanor. People whose hearts are lowly, instead of proud, will act more meekly toward others. The meek count others above themselves and serve them. That happens when the heart is lowly, or humble.

So, husbands, sink your roots by faith into Christ through the gospel until you become more lowly and humble. Wives, sink your roots by faith into Christ through the gospel until you become more lowly and humble. The gospel of Christ’s painful death on our behalf has a way of breaking our pride and our sense of rightful demands and our frustration at not getting our way. It works lowliness into our souls. Then we treat each other with meekness flowing out of that lowliness. The battle is with our own proud, self-centered inner person. Fight that battle by faith, through the gospel, in prayer. Be stunned and broken and built up and made glad and humble because you are chosen, holy, loved.

From Long-Suffering to Forbearance and Forgiveness

The next pair is not exactly a pair. It’s an inner condition followed by forbearance *and* forgiveness. But forbearance and forgiveness are one. Neither can exist biblically without the other. Verse 12: “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and *patience, bearing with* one another and, if one

has a complaint against another, *forgiving* each other.” So I am treating “patience” as the inner condition and forbearance/forgiveness as the outward demeanor or behavior.

The literal translation of patience is “long-suffering.” That is, become the kind of person who does not have a short fuse but a long one. A very long one. Become a patient person, slow to anger, quick to listen, slow to speak (Jas. 1:19). These three inner conditions I have mentioned connect with each other and affect each other. “Bowels of mercy” and “lowliness” lead to being “long-suffering.” If you are quick to anger, instead of being long-suffering, the root is probably lack of mercy and lack of lowliness. In other words, being chosen, holy, and loved has not broken your heart and brought you down from self-centeredness and pride.

So, husbands, sink your roots by faith into Christ through the gospel until your heart is formed by these inner conditions of compassion and lowliness and patience. Fight for inner change—making you more merciful and more lowly and, in that way, more long-suffering. In the same way, wives, sink your roots by faith into Christ through the gospel until you become more merciful and more lowly and more long-suffering.

Then treat each other with . . . what? This final pair is not exactly a pair. First, there was the pair of compassionate or merciful hearts leading to a demeanor of kindness. Then there was the pair of humility or lowliness leading to a demeanor of meekness. But now there is patience or long-suffering leading to what?

FORBEARING AND FORGIVING IN MARRIAGE

“Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved . . . patience, *bearing with* one another and, if one has a complaint against another, *forgiving* each other” (Col. 3:12–13). The inner condition of patience is followed by two things, not one thing: first, “bearing with one another” and then, second, “if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other.” Forbearing and forgiving. What does this mean, and what does it look like in marriage?

First, a comment about the two words. *Forbear* or *bear with*: The

word is literally *endure*—enduring each other. Jesus uses it in Luke 9:41: “O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to *bear with you*?” Paul uses it again in 1 Corinthians 4:12: “When persecuted, we *endure*.” That’s the meaning here: Become long-suffering persons and endure each other. Forbear. “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends” (1 Cor. 13:7–8).

The other word is *forgive*. There are at least two words for *forgive* in the New Testament. This one used here (*charizomenoi*) means “freely or graciously give.” The idea is that when we forgive, we do not exact a payment. We treat people better than they deserve. So in this sense, you forgive when someone has wronged you, and therefore they are in debt to you, and sheer justice says you have the right to exact some suffering from them in payment for the suffering they caused you. You not only don’t demand the payment, but you “freely give” good for evil. That is the meaning of this word *forgive* (*charizomai*). Your ordinary disposition is forgiving—you do not return evil for evil, but you bless (Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27; 1 Cor. 4:12; 1 Thess. 5:15).

“FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE”

Now what I find so helpful here is that Paul recognizes that *both* forgiving *and* forbearing are crucial for life together—whether in church or marriage. Forgiveness says: I will not treat you badly because of your sins against me or your annoying habits. And forbearance acknowledges (usually to itself): Those sins against me and those annoying habits *really* bother me or hurt me! If there were nothing in the other person that really bothered us or hurt us, there would be no need for saying “endure one another.”

When you marry a person, you don’t know what they are going to be like in thirty years. Our forefathers did not craft wedding vows with their heads in the sand. Their eyes were wide-open to reality—“to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, *for worse*, for richer, *for poorer*, in *sickness* and in health, to love, honor, and cherish, ’til death do us part, and thereto I plight thee my troth [I pledge you my faithfulness].” You don’t know what this person will be like in the future. It could be better than you ever dreamed, or worse. Our hope

is based on this: We are chosen, holy, and loved. God is for us, and all things will work for the good of those who love him (Rom. 8:28; Ps. 23:6; 84:11).

THE COMPOST PILE

So what about the compost pile I mentioned at the end of the last chapter? Picture your marriage as a grassy field. You enter it at the beginning full of hope and joy. You look out into the future, and you see beautiful flowers and trees and rolling hills. And that beauty is what you see in each other. Your relationship is the field and the flowers and the rolling hills. But before long, you begin to step in cow pies. Some seasons of your marriage they may seem to be everywhere. Late at night they are especially prevalent. These are the sins and flaws and idiosyncrasies and weaknesses and annoying habits in you and in your spouse. You try to forgive them and endure them with grace.

But they have a way of dominating the relationship. It may not even be true, but sometimes it feels like that's all there is—cow pies. Noël and I have come to believe that the combination of forbearance and forgiveness leads to the creation of a compost pile. That's where you shovel the cow pies.

You both look at each other and simply admit that there are a lot of cow pies. But you say to each other: You know, there is more to this relationship than cow pies. And we are losing sight of that because we keep focusing on these cow pies. Let's throw them all in the compost pile. When we have to, we will go there and smell it and feel bad and deal with it the best we can. And then we are going to walk away from that pile and set our eyes on the rest of the field. We will pick some favorite paths and hills that we know are not strewn with cow pies. And we will be thankful for the part of the field that is sweet.

Our hands may be dirty. And our backs may ache from all the shoveling. But one thing we know: We will not pitch our tent by the compost pile. We will only go there when we must. This is a gift of grace that we will give each other again and again and again—because we are chosen and holy and loved.

POPPING THE BUBBLE OF NAIVETÉ

We are aware that some folks don't like this idea of a compost pile. They feel as if it is a concession to sin that compromises the possibilities of repentance and change. Believe me, we empathize with that. I hope the next chapter corrects any misunderstanding—as if we didn't believe in working hard at getting rid of cow-pie behavior entirely. We do believe in that. We believe in the pursuit of personal change and holiness. We believe in small-group efforts to work on each other's marriages. We believe in professional biblical counseling.

But we are forty years into this glorious and maddening thing called marriage, and we are not naive. These two redeemed sinners will go to our graves imperfect and annoying. We are very comforted that Paul does not say, "Endure one another for the first ten years of your marriage till you have all the problems solved and all the sins overcome, then enjoy the green pastures of the last forty years of your marriage without the need for enduring each other." Sorry to pop any bubbles out there. Well, actually, we're not sorry. We would rather pop the bubble of naiveté and give you a possible way to endure and enjoy. But we do hope you will read the next chapter to balance the point.



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