

The Enduring Goodness of Marriage

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by David Schrock

With his characteristic biblical insight and cultural engagement, Tim Keller's book on marriage, [*The Meaning of Marriage*](#), is filled with wisdom and encouragement. Aimed at marrieds and singles considering marriage (and singles who have sworn off the institution), Keller provides a helpful look at God's design for marriage. Importantly, he spends the first chapter considering the state of marriage today. He recognizes the way in which marriage has been assailed by the culture, and he makes a cogent argument for the enduring goodness of marriage in a secular age. It's from this first chapter, I want to share a few quotations that reflect on the pain of marriage, the enduring goodness of marriage, the perversion of marriage (i.e., how redefined expectations for marriage have twisted God's original design); and way the gospel brings hope and meaning to marriage. If these quotes resonate with you, I encourage you to pick up Keller's excellent [book](#).

The Pain of Marriage

If we are honest marriage brings with it incredible blessings, but also incredible pain. Therefore, any consideration of marriage must tackle both the goodness and fallenness of marriage. As Keller observes,

"No marriage I know more than a few weeks old could be described as a fairy tale come true." (21)

"Like knowing God himself, coming to know and love your spouse is difficult and painful yet rewarding and wondrous." (22)

"As comedian Chris Rock has asked, 'Do you want to be single and lonely or married and bored?' Many young adults believe that these are indeed the two main options. That is why many aim for something in the middle between marriage and mere sexual encounters—cohabitation with a sexual partner." (22) Cohabitation, indeed, is a prevalent option in our day, and any full throated defense of marriage must consider why this is a popular option, and why God's vision of marriage is both better and more satisfying.

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In response to cohabitation, Keller shows why all of its promises fail under closer scrutiny. "Cohabitation is an understandable response from those who experienced their own parents' painful divorces, but the facts indicate that the cure may be worse than the alleged disease." (23)

Specifically, Keller identifies at least five ways that marriage, specifically

considered, provides greater enduring happiness and security than anything approximated by cohabitation.

First, Keller reminds us that **divorce is not inevitable** in marriage. He writes, While it is true that some 45 percent of marriages end in divorce, by far the greatest percentage of divorces happen to those who marry before the age of eighteen, who have dropped out of high school, and who have had a baby together before marrying. [Quoting Bradford Wilcox of the The National Marriage Project], "So if you are a reasonably well-educated person with a decent income, come from an intact family and are religious, and marry after twenty-five without having a baby first, your chances of divorce are low indeed." (23–24)

To be sure, this argument depends on socio-economic realities, but it also mirrors God's design. When a couple grows up, leaves home (implying some measure of economic stability), and waits to be sexually active until after marriage, the blessings are profound—including a lower chance at divorce.

Second, related to the order of marriage and sex, statistics also show **economic security is improved by marriage**.

A 1992 study of retirement data shows that individuals who were continuously married had 75 percent more wealth at retirement than those who never married or who divorced and did not remarry. Even more remarkably, married men have been shown to earn 10–40 percent more than do single men with similar education and job histories. (24)

Third, **marriage has a track record of improving mental and emotional health**.

Marriage provides a profound "shock absorber" that helps you navigate disappointments, illnesses, and offer difficulties. . . . Studies show that spouses hold one another to greater levels of personal responsibility and self-discipline than friends or other family members can. (24)

Fourth, despite much anecdotal evidence and popular myth, **marriage on average improves happiness**.

All surveys tell us that the number of married people who say they are "very happy" in their marriages is high—about 61–62 percent—and there has been little decrease in this figure during the last decade. Most striking of all, longitudinal studies demonstrate that two-thirds of those unhappy marriages out there will become happy within five years if people stay married and do not get divorced. (25–26)

Fifth, the stability of **marriage greatly improves the emotional health of children**.

[Citing Bradford Wilcox again], Children who grow up in married, two-parent families have two or three times more positive life outcomes than those who do not. (26)

In short, these five benefits show why marriage is happier, healthier, and more stable than anything cohabitation can offer. That said, a Christian view of marriage must go beyond the common graces offered by marriage. Indeed, it must uphold and extol a biblical vision of marriage that finds its origin in Eden and its climax in Christ and the church—a vision that has been increasingly turned and twisted by the ideals of [individualism and self-expression](#).

The Perversion of Marriage

By perversion I'm not talking about sexual orientation, I'm describing the way the Enlightenment changed the fundamental orientation of marriage from self-giving to self-expression. Keller highlights this in a number of ways.

Instead of finding meaning through self-denial, through giving up one's freedoms, and binding oneself to the duties of marriage and family, marriage was redefined as finding emotional and sexual fulfillment and self-actualization. (28)

The Enlightenment privatized marriage, taking it out of the public sphere, and redefined its purpose as individual gratification, not any 'broader good' such as reflecting God's nature, producing character, or raising children. (28)

Marriage used to be a public institution for the common good, and now it is a private arrangement for the satisfaction of the individual. Marriage used to be about *us*, but now it is about *me*. (29)

All of this self-orientation in marriage has led to unrealistic expectations for husbands and wives. As a result, marriage can no longer deliver "apocalyptic romance" (41) that is offered by it today. But the problem is not with marriage; the problem is with how it has been redefined. As Keller puts it, the modern world "look[s] to sex and romance to give us what we used to get from faith in God" (41).

Gospel Hope for Marriage

With all of these factors in mind, is there any hope for marriage?

Absolutely! There is hope for marriage when it is considered in light of the gospel. When the gospel of Jesus Christ is brought to save, sanctify, and strengthen husbands and wives, then pain, problems, and perversions of marriage find new light.

This gospel hope is where Keller brings his readers, and where we must begin in our conversation about marriage, especially as we talk about marriage to a culture that despises marriage. For that reason, let me conclude with Keller's words focused on the gospel and its relationship to marriage.

Marriage is a major vehicle for the gospel's remaking of your heart from the inside out and your life from the ground up.

The reason that marriage is so painful and yet wonderful is because it is a reflection of the gospel, which is painful and wonderful at once. The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope. This is the only kind of relationship that will really transform us. Love without truth is sentimentality; it supports and affirms us but keeps us in denial about our flaws. Truth without love is harshness; it gives us information but in such a way that we cannot really hear it. God's saving love in Christ, however, is marked by both radical truthfulness about who we are and yet also radical, unconditional commitment to us. The merciful commitment strengthens us to see the truth about ourselves and repent. The conviction and repentance moves us to cling to and rest in God's mercy and grace. (48)

Truly, with this focus on the gospel, there is hope for marriage—for your marriage

and any marriage that looks to Jesus Christ. Ultimately, this is why God gave us marriage, and why we must look first to Christ and the church as the model and motivation for all marriages.

To that end let us look. And may God have mercy on our marriages.

Soli Deo Gloria, ds