

## **This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence**

John Piper

Crossway, 2009

192 pages

### **A Brief Book Summary from Books at a Glance**

By Joshua Downs

#### **About the Author**

John Piper (DTheol, University of Munich) is the founder and teacher of [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org) and the chancellor of Bethlehem College & Seminary. He served for 33 years as the senior pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and is the author of more than 50 books, including *Desiring God*, *Don't Waste Your Life*, and *Does God Desire All to Be Saved?*

#### **Overview**

John Piper deals with marriage as a uniquely Christ-exalting facet of life in this age. Marriage shows the eternal reality of Christ's relationship with his church. When we bear that fact out, we look forward to the life to come more fervently and show Christ's covenant faithfulness to the world.

#### **Table of Contents**

1. Staying Married Is Not Mainly about Staying in Love
2. Naked and Not Ashamed
3. God's Showcase of Covenant-Keeping Grace
4. Forgiving and Forbearing
5. Pursuing Conformity to Christ in the Covenant
6. Lionhearted and Lamblike—The Christian Husband as Head: Foundations of Headship
7. Lionhearted and Lamblike—The Christian Husband as Head: What Does It Mean to Lead?
8. The Beautiful Faith of Fearless Submission
9. Single in Christ: A Name Better Than Sons and Daughters
10. Singleness, Marriage, and the Christian Virtue of Hospitality
11. Faith and Sex in Marriage
12. Marriage Is Meant for Making Children . . . Disciples of Jesus: How Absolute Is the Duty to Procreate?
13. Marriage Is Meant for Making Children . . . Disciples of Jesus: The Conquest of Anger in Father and Child
14. What God Has Joined Together, Let Not Man Separate: The Gospel and the Radical New Obedience
15. What God Has Joined Together, Let Not Man Separate: The Gospel and the Divorced

#### **Summary**

##### **Chapter 1**

##### **Staying Married Is Not Mainly about Staying in Love**

Having introduced the book with an analogy between marriage and martyrdom--each shows forth the passing and momentary nature of the present in light of the life to come--John Piper qualifies marriage in the face of a culture with too low a view of marriage. Indeed, the biblical vision of marriage is a high one. There are a few considerations which help to show this gap between our selfish, sinful conceptions of marriage and God's own institution.

- 1) Marriage is, most foundationally, God's doing. Genesis 2:18-25 shows God's purpose for marriage: he gives away the first bride as he speaks the design of marriage into existence. He even performs the one-flesh union (Genesis 2:24).
- 2) Further, marriage is for God's glory. We might say this is the ultimate thing to see about marriage: God uniquely displays his glory here (Ephesians 5:31-32). Just as Christ will never leave his bride, the church, and just as he brings her to himself to show his love, marriage is about covenant faithfulness -- the love of seeking the good of another.

In short, Christ died for his bride, and marriage is our truth-telling exercise of the Lord's faithful relationship to his people.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Naked and Not Ashamed**

As we consider further the notion of the two people called "one flesh" or "one spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:16-17) in marriage, a puzzling element of this covenant-keeping arises: the pair, Adam and Eve, were naked and not ashamed. How is that? In other words, what is the nature of the intimacy they enjoyed?

Though they had perfect bodies, the answer runs deeper than that. They had a lasting union in covenant commitment -- ultimately, they were secure in their love for each other by covenant bond. We see this break down when their more basic relationship to God changes at the Fall. Shame relative to each other enters, fundamentally, because each one has sought to live independently from God. In other words, a humble love in submission to God yields grace for the covenant bond between two sinners; rebellion brings shame and judgment. It is for this reason, namely to hide what really happened, that they sought to make clothing for themselves.

Indeed, even as God mercifully clothes Adam and Eve to cover their shame after the Fall, he shows the covenantal nature of his love. He covers them with skins, a once-bloody reminder of the true cost of sin in death.

## **Chapter 3**

### **God's Showcase of Covenant-Keeping Grace**

Next we turn to the implications of this covenantal understanding of marriage. If it's not about love primarily, how does it fit together?

We have seen that marriage is a display of God's glory. Chiefly, that display happens in justification, in forgiving sinners and imputing righteousness to them for Christ's sake. That vertical relationship between a person and his covenant Lord lays the foundation for the forgiveness of sins in human relationships. We are to *live vertically, then bend outwards*. Covenant love is forgiveness. We know that because the Lord shows his love in exactly this way. We start with his forgiveness of us, then move to apply that horizontally (Colossians 3:12-13).

Covenant love expressed in forgiveness is so crucial to deal with the sin and strangeness which tends to cause division in a marriage. Surely Christ, when he canceled the record of debt against us (Colossians 2:13-14), did the greater thing. We must in turn bend it toward our spouse.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Forgiving and Forbearing**

Taking our starting point from Colossians 3:12, we now turn to consider how forgiveness and forbearance fit into a marriage marked by the covenant-keeping love of Christ for his church.

The beginning of the forgiveness which spouses ought to exercise toward each other is this: each person should be blown away by being “chosen, set apart, and loved” by God. We get our joy here. From that basis come the virtues Paul extols in Colossians 3:12: humility, meekness, long-suffering, forbearance, and forgiveness. Forgiveness pledges not to treat the other person badly because of their sins; forbearance acknowledges that there are sins and annoyances to be endured with patience. Doing this well is at the heart of what it means “to have and to hold... for better or for worse.”

One way to practice forgiveness and forbearance is to see your marriage like a green field -- green and joyful at the beginning, perhaps -- at times over-run with the cow pies of sin and bad habits. Practice shoveling those cow-pies into a compost pile: deal with the sin and pursue the holiness which would eliminate the cow pies (the subject of the next chapter), but don't live there. Keep the negative things contained so that you can enjoy each other, then turn to deal with the compost pile as well as you can.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Pursuing Conformity to Christ in the Covenant**

As we move forward and talk about positive change in marriage, we have to keep a few things in mind. For one, the real basis of change is God's grace in the gospel. Period. That is why we started there. Second, any talk of obedience and change must be applied to ourselves first, not to our spouse first.

And the glad fact is this: marriage should not and need not be static. Endurance is a good picture of God's covenant love, but it is not the best picture. Godly conformity to Christ is. Ephesians 5:25-27 shows the way of moral and spiritual transformation.

There are dangerous turns here as the legalist and selfish person might use Paul's commands to a bad end. Note that the husband is not Christ; he is *like* Christ in this relationship. He is not infallible. We are after conformity to *Christ*, not the husband. The husband, furthermore, should be dying for the wife. Note too, then, that wives can change their husbands as they submit first to Christ and so show respect to their husbands out of utmost fidelity to their true Lord, Christ.

The big picture of Paul's words here for marriage is that both individuals seek change by sacrifice, dying to themselves. This places forgiveness and forbearance in the context of sacrificial love which helps conform one another to the image of the holy Son of God.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Lionhearted and Lamblike—The Christian Husband as Head: Foundations of Headship**

Building as often as we can off of Ephesians 5:23 (“The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church”), we notice that the Christ who is the perfect husband is the Lion of Judah and the Lamb of God. This combination of strength and meekness should characterize husbands.

Jesus’ lion-and-lamb character involves the tender leadership of Christ. He is the model. It is here that we lay the foundation for headship and submission. Paul calls this relationship between Christ’s leadership over the church and its connection to marriage “a mystery.” Marriage is a living drama of the one-flesh union, and husbands ought to look to the Lord as the servant of his bride.

And so how does Christ lead his bride, the church? Husbands are called to follow their Lord in *headship* characterized by “a divine calling ... to take primary responsibility for Christlike, servant leadership, protection, and provision in the home.” Wives, in turn, are called to a *submission* which is “the divine calling ... to honor and affirm her husband’s leadership and help carry it through according to her gifts.” At stake in all this is the revelation of the covenant-keeping Christ and his church in the world. Next we move on to apply these concepts.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Lionhearted and Lamblike—The Christian Husband as Head: What Does It Mean to Lead?**

Next we turn to lay out some practical application of the Christian husband’s responsibility to lead. Leadership like Christ’s has two fundamental expressions in the family: protection and provision. These are really two aspects of leadership.

The term *head* yields back abundant examples in Scripture, from the heads of the people in Judges to Paul’s characterization of Christ as the head of the church in Ephesians 1:21-23. Leadership is expressed, then, in protection. It’s important to note that this call to protect is to the point of sacrifice even as Jesus “gave himself up” for the church.

Leadership also means providing for the wife. Ephesians 5:28-29 outlines the analogy of a person *nourishing and cherishing* his own flesh (this refers to the wife).

We find expressions of protection and provision in physical and spiritual terms. Practically, this means that the husband takes *primary* -- not sole -- responsibility for *initiating* the nourishment and guarding of the family. This involves being gainfully employed, seeing to it that the family is spiritually fed and instructed, confronting physical danger on the front lines, and moving first to seek reconciliation within the family. This is Christlike leadership, even if the wife happens to be more intellectually, spiritually, or physically gifted.

## **Chapter 8**

### **The Beautiful Faith of Fearless Submission**

In setting out the big picture of submission in marriage, it is imperative that all -- men, women, old, and young -- see this calling as a “strong and noble and beautiful and dignified” thing worthy of a person’s highest spiritual and moral efforts.

First, notice the way 1 Peter 2:13-17 implores all of us to be subject to human institutions. 1

Peter 3:1-12 develops this idea with respect to women in marriage. We see that wives are meant to submit to *their own* husbands, not just to any man, in the Lord. Verse 5 mentions that women hope in God as they submit: the responsibility is first about adorning one's own hope in the Lord through the vehicle of the marital relationship. Let's go through a few things this submission does *not* entail. It does *not* involve: agreeing with everything your husband says; leaving your brain or will at the wedding altar; putting the will of the husband before the will of Christ; getting your personal, spiritual strength through your husband.

Rather, submission is (following from the definition in Chapter 6) joyfully following the lead of the husband and not being satisfied when he is passive in taking care of the family. This is a disposition and inclination to follow the lead, not an unthinking automatic following: there will be times when the husband is wrong or should be questioned for some reason. But even that can be done submissively. In all, it's crucial to see that God's way is good for us seeing that he knows our frame.

## **Chapter 9**

### **Single in Christ: A Name Better Than Sons and Daughters**

This chapter is included in a book on marriage to remind us that marriage is not ultimate. In fact, those single readers may find that their estate is better. The thesis is this: "God promises those who remain single in Christ blessings that are better than the blessings of marriage and children." A few truths stand out from the witness of single Christians:

- 1) the family of God grows not by propagation, but by regeneration through faith
- 2) relationships in Christ are more permanent and more precious than relationships in families
- 3) marriage is temporary; Christ and the church are permanent
- 4) faithfulness to Christ defines the value of life; all other relationships gain their value from this

While marriage and children are blessings in countless ways, and while we mourn when we are not granted these blessings, there are beauties unique to singleness. Consider Jesus, Paul, and Peter. 1 Peter 1:3-4 outlines that being *born again* in the kingdom is paramount: "single people in Christ have zero disadvantage in bearing children for God and may, in some ways, have a great advantage. Matthew 19:12 sets forth a broad vision as well, one which seems to animate Paul's thinking in 1 Corinthians 7. Some are set apart for special service in the kingdom expressly by the pattern of a life of singleness. We must say then that there are benefits each for singleness and for marriage that God uses in unique ways.

## **Chapter 10**

### **Singleness, Marriage, and the Christian Virtue of Hospitality**

Next, we build on this idea that family is not primary or ultimate; rather, God and his family are our primary concern. If that's true, as we've argued that it is, the way we live together in God's church, whether married or single, is of great value for magnifying Christ. 1 Peter 4:7-11 points us toward life in our homes -- truly opening up our lives to one another -- as a fundamental way to express our faith and live out the Christian life. Notice verse 10: we are to use our varied gifts to serve one another.

Truly, as Christ has welcomed us into his Father's house, so we are to welcome one another who

have been purchased by him. For married people, this should include singles as well in meals together, picnics, etc.. We are a family together, for one thing, and the material things we enjoy, when rightly seen and used, make God's glory more fully known and displayed.

## **Chapter 11**

### **Faith and Sex in Marriage**

Before turning to look at children in marriage, we must pause and address the hugely important matter of sexuality. It is not the case that sex is merely a tool for procreation: God could have ensured the latter through various means without the huge capacity for sexual pleasure which humans possess. Again we find that sex is good, but it is not ultimate.

Just as Christians in past ages were right to see Solomon's Song of Songs as a pointer to Christ's relationship with the church, so we must see our own sexual relationship with our spouse as pointing beyond itself. Assuming that basic fact, it is not difficult to see the way that faith and contentment in God (the One who is beyond so many creaturely pointers) keeps us from using sex as a means of power. When a person rests content in God and his gifts, including the spouse God has given him, sex arising out of that faith is actually a shield against Satan's attacks (1 Corinthians 7:3-5).

God-honoring and faith-fueled sex involves each one looking out for the good of the other. Such intimacy and communion together displays Christ by magnifying the delight which husband and wife experience toward each other.

## **Chapter 12**

### **Marriage Is Meant for Making Children . . . Disciples of Jesus: How Absolute Is the Duty to Procreate?**

As we have stressed throughout, Ephesians 5:23-25 makes the meaning of marriage plain: it is about Christ and the church. It is not ultimately about our feelings of love or about children or about itself. And yet, marriage is also about making children... into disciples. Procreation is important. But the focus must shift for us as we seek not just to add humans to the planet but to add followers of Jesus to the kingdom.

Stating the point this way has the effect of ringing the clear bell of biblical teaching as well as telling infertile couples that their purpose is not lost: they too can make disciples for the kingdom. Marriage and having children was God's original design, but we've seen how marriage is not for all in a fallen world, and it is only too obvious that having children is not absolute either. So there is a primary focus for most on these two facets of human life, but those who forego these blessings do not necessarily get the lesser part.

In Mark 10:29-30 Jesus shifts the focus off of property, brothers, *children*, etc. to bearing out those things in the kingdom. Perhaps this happens by adoption or a greater role in the church, but Jesus would have us exercise our zeal for the sake of his body whether that happens through biological family or not.

## **Chapter 13**

### **Marriage Is Meant for Making Children . . . Disciples of Jesus: The Conquest of Anger in Father and Child**

In chapter 13 we think more specifically about the way that male headship intersects with raising children. To state the matter frankly, if there are problems with the children at the Piper home and Jesus knocks on the door, he will say to whoever answers, Is the head of the household at home? We need to talk.

This is not to say that Mrs. Piper bears no responsibility; but the husband and father is accountable for leading the house. This helps us to understand why Paul shifts from Ephesians 6:1, *parents*, to 6:4, “*Fathers*, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” But why anger? It may be because anger is the most ready emotion when we sinners are confronted with authority. Children should be raised in such a way that they submit to authority joyfully, rather than in anger. This is not to say that if the child is angry, the father has sinned. Instead, the father should focus his behavior so as not to provoke such a reaction, even though it will come from his sinful child from time to time at best.

And this negative command has huge positive implications! Fathers should positively do things that prevent and overcome anger, the great deadening emotion. Dad has to begin in his own heart and see the starting point of Christ’s forgiveness and then extend that out to those in his care.

## **Chapter 14**

### **What God Has Joined Together, Let Not Man Separate: The Gospel and the Radical New Obedience**

We have seen the radical heavenliness of marriage thus far in the book. Marriage shows Christ and his covenant love. But what happens when we break that God-made union? Pain follows of a particularly complex kind: there is loss, but there is also the pain of sin and moral outrage. There is the feeling that the future has been devastated.

So where can divorced Christians find hope? First, it is vitally important that their brothers and sisters stand by them and help them grieve their loss and repent for any part they may have played in the divorce.

Jesus’ teaching on divorce in Mark 10:1-13 brings together strains of teaching from Moses -- from Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 as well as Deuteronomy 24:1. Jesus holds the indissoluble character of marriage against the law which describes a certificate of divorce. He finds the resolution in what was so from the beginning, namely, that what God joins together, man should not separate. In Deuteronomy 24 we see a bare permission which Moses grants to a sinful people in light of their situation. Just as we are called to a higher ethic regarding adultery and other sins in the Sermon on the Mount (“you have heard it said... but I say to you...” Matthew 5:27-28), so we face a higher calling in marriage. We may only divorce when Christ divorces his church. In all this, Jesus offers redemption and forgiveness to all who call on him as the faithful bridegroom.

## **Chapter 15**

### **What God Has Joined Together, Let Not Man Separate: The Gospel and the Divorced**

The reason it is appropriate to write another chapter on the dignity, worth, and Christ-exalting potential of singleness in a book on marriage is because divorce throws so many into the situation, often unwillingly. Those who find themselves there should remain single to show forth the truth of the nature of marriage, and thus the nature of Christ and the church: it is a “lifelong commitment to one living spouse.”

To aid in the many practical questions which arise on this issue, we must address a few practical questions. Here we include just one. “Does death end a marriage in such a way that it is legitimate for a spouse to remarry?” In short, yes. Romans 7:1-3 is a key text. This points to the clear biblical truth that after death, there is no marriage. When a spouse dies, they pass on to a realm where there is no marriage.

We must say a word about “the exception clause” in Matthew 19:3-12. Here, it is often held, Jesus allows for divorce in the case of adultery. The word, though, is not adultery, but *moicheia*, typically used for sexual immorality. In fact, the word for “divorce” here is the same one used in Matthew 1:19 to describe what Joseph intended to do to Mary in their betrothal. It is not a real divorce, then, but a separation of betrothed parties. Jesus is outlining provisions for dealing with *fornication* within the context of betrothal. Thus, this is no exception clause for divorce. This view is not widely held, but it is worth considering in light of the heightened calling Christians look to in the wake of Jesus’ coming into the world

“The gospel of Christ crucified for our sins is the foundation of our lives. Marriage exists to display it. And when marriage breaks down, the gospel is there to forgive and heal and sustain until he comes, or until he calls.”

### **Conclusion**

Marriage is a momentary gift, a shadow which will soon give way to Reality. The foretaste of marriage, in other words, gives way to the marriage Banquet in heaven where Christ dines with his bride. When we treat marriage with this perspective, we may sever every marriage-destroying impulse and show forth God’s glory to a watching world.

### **Copyright 2015, Books At a Glance**

This Book Summary was first published on [Books At a Glance](#) and is used here with permission.