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The Vision and the Mission

Crawford: *May 22, 1971 stands as the happiest day of my life. Why wouldn't it be? After all, I said "I do" to the love of my life, and our hearts were filled with hope, dreams, and the anticipation of a wonderful future and life together. But I was also sobered by this incredible sense of responsibility. As I glanced at my parents sitting on the front row, my heart was filled with gratitude to God for the example and model of love and commitment to their marriage and to each other. I remember thinking, "Oh God, help Karen and me to have the same thing."*

Then after the ceremony, Pop whispered in my ear, "C. W., remember, you asked to marry Karen. Whatever it takes, you make sure you take care of her in every way."

I must admit the old boy put the fear of God in me. But that wasn't his intention. He was reminding me that next to my relationship with Christ, I had just made the most important commitment of my life.

Our wedding was beautiful. All weddings are beautiful. As a pastor, I love doing weddings. But it is easy to get caught up in the ceremony, the celebration, and all the trappings of the big day, and forget the reality that a *marriage*—the

foundation of civilization—is taking place.

Karen and I have four children, and I have been privileged to perform their wedding ceremonies. When each of our children came to me and said that they were in a serious relationship and considering getting married, I reminded them—like Pop reminded me—that next to surrendering their lives to Christ, this was the most important decision they will ever make.

Important for each other, yes. But there's more to marriage than the bride and groom. Marriage is about now and the future. No, not just the future as in our lifetime, but the future as in affecting future generations. So when a couple stands before a minister, surrounded by witnesses, they are making a commitment that will set the course and trajectory of their lives, that will impact a time that they cannot see but will influence. The shape and condition of their marriage will be seen, felt, and experienced by the couple's children. It will profoundly affect those children's outlook and approach to marriage and how they imprint *their* children. And so on . . .

But *how* does marriage affect future generations, for better or for worse? How can we pass on a godly legacy to those who come after us? What is God's vision for marriage—and the mission He has charged us with?

The Bible answers these questions. In fact, God through His Word is clear about the vision and mission of marriage. Regrettably, we've allowed the influences in the culture and society to cloud this vision, redefine marriage, and repackage how we think about this sacred institution. Satan, the enemy of God and His purposes, wants to either destroy marriage or keep every couple confused about God's plan for their marriage. Why? *Because marriage*

is the sacred conduit by which God's plan and purposes are passed on from one generation to the next.

Marriage: The First Institution

In this book we'll be sharing a lot about how this has worked (or hasn't worked) in our families and family histories. But before we share our stories, we want to start with God's story—His Word. So let's go all the way back to the beginning to see what God had in mind.

Now, you're not going to see the words "marriage" or "family" in this passage from Genesis, which talks about God's intentions for creating us. However, God's plan for marriage and family and our stewardship responsibility—that is, what we do with what God has given us—are anchored to this text. Look closely at these words:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."


So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Gen. 1:26–28)

In His image

There are several points I want to highlight from the passage. One, since we were made in the image of God, it follows that as a couple we are to reflect and steward that image. You can see that the word *image* is used three times in these verses. God wants it understood that we were created to not only be in relationship with Him but to *look* like Him. We are to reflect and magnify the character and nature of our great God. What's most important in the marriage is what the marriage says about God and not what it says about us. God is the object, essence, and focus of the marriage and our life together as a couple. This indeed is what and who we live for and what we place in the hands of the next generation. His image won't fade away. Ours will.

Karen and I have eleven grandchildren. We absolutely love spending time with them and making wonderful memories together. Vacations, calls, FaceTime, special events, surprise visits, texts, and more are intentional ways in which we build memories



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and stay connected. What great times we have and share together. But we also know that these memories and expressions of our love are not ultimately enduring. Time marches on. The day will come when they will no longer hear Mimi and Papa's voices. Hopefully they will tell their children about us and the memories of vacations at the

beach or the hours we spent laughing and being silly. But this too will eventually fade.

What will last? What will have mattered most? What will give them hope? The image of God. If our marriage and approach to

parenting and grandparenting have reflected the character and nature of our great God, and if our journey through this life has been the story of God's faithfulness and supernatural intervention on our behalf, then by God's grace we have benchmarked their pilgrimage and given them that which lasts forever. This is the mission of marriage.

In addition, there's a very important pronoun in verse 26, the opening line of the passage: "Let *us* make man in *our* image" (emphasis added). God is speaking, but the pronouns are plural. He didn't say, "Let *me* make man in *my* image." No, He said "us" and "our." This is not only a clear reference to the involvement of the Trinity in our creation, but it also refers to how the image of God is to be shared and experienced. The plural pronouns give us a window into the relationship that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have with one another and, thus, the relationship we are to have with them and with other human beings, especially in the context of marriage and the family.

Further, the verse says that we were made in their "image" and in their "likeness." What does this mean? As I mentioned, it clearly is a reference to the character and nature of God, but I also believe that it means something more. Although it is not explicitly stated, this is a hint toward and a window into the unity and oneness experienced by the Trinity. To be made in their image and to be made into their likeness is to be created for relationship and community with God and with one another. We are created to be loved and to love.

Marriage and family are intended to be a reflection and portrait of the oneness and love found in the Trinity. Just as God created us to experience that love and unity, He has called us to

become and model that love and unity. The joy and purity of this love is compelling and attractive, coming from the heart of the Trinity and fulfilled in community and relationship with others, especially in marriage. This too is a reflection of the image of God.

Not alone

Further, marriage is *designed to meet our aloneness needs*. Look at these words in Genesis 2:18: “Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.’” Up until this point everything that God created is followed by the declaration, “it was good.” Now He creates Adam and says that it is not good that he should be alone. God didn’t say that the creation of Adam was not good. He said that the fact that “the man” was alone was not good.

God deliberately created Adam with a need that God Himself chose not to directly meet. He created Adam with the need for a companion. It is important to note that this need in Adam was not because he had sinned and therefore was the consequence of missing the mark or disobedience. That would come later. God makes this declaration before Adam sinned.

God intentionally built into Adam a need to be with another—a need not to be alone, a need He could fulfill by designing another human being to meet that need. In so doing, together Adam and Eve would experience and reflect the image of God and know and represent the love and community experienced and enjoyed by the Trinity.

In Genesis 2:19–23, God gives Adam the assignment of naming the animals, and thereby underscores to Adam his need for a companion. Verse 20 says, “But for Adam there was not found a

helper fit for him.” Adam then falls asleep, and God takes a rib from his side and creates Eve. When Adam wakes up he is greeted with an unimaginable gift. God presents Eve to Adam.

Adam is ecstatic! Look at what he says: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (Gen. 2:23). In so many words, Adam says, “Wow! I can’t believe my eyes . . . She is from me and for me.” They were together. Adam was no longer alone.

Karen and I met at the beginning of my sophomore year in college. We began spending a lot of time together. We took long walks and would talk for hours. I couldn’t stop thinking about her and I didn’t want to stop thinking about her. Something was happening to me. She was experiencing the same thing. We were in love, and our love for each other was growing. That summer I went on tour with the college quartet. Those guys were great friends and we liked hanging out together. In fact, we were together constantly. But I was lonely. I missed Karen. I just couldn’t see myself without her. And it was reassuring to know that she felt the same about me. God designed us to meet each other’s aloneness needs. She is God’s amazing gift to me.

Leave, hold fast, become one

After Adam jubilantly welcomes Eve, God seals the deal by commissioning the institution of marriage in Genesis 2:24. “Therefore shall a man *leave* his father and his mother and *hold fast* to his wife, and they shall *become one flesh*” (emphasis added). This verse highlights the new reality that every healthy marriage must embrace. Every wedding ceremony I perform, I spend time explaining this foundational reality.


Most marriages that fall apart—or just atrophy—do so because of failure to pursue the three crucial choices outlined in this verse: “Leave.” “Hold fast.” “Become one flesh.” Let’s look at each of these.

First, *leave*. This does not mean to abandon your parents or no longer have a loving, healthy relationship with them. Being married doesn’t mean that we replace our relationship with our parents. It means that the relationship of necessity changes. To leave means to establish healthy independence as a couple. When we get married, we are to take care of ourselves—to physically, financially, and emotionally leave home and the care of our parents and establish and embrace our new identity as a married couple. We choose to own our choices and decisions, along with the consequences of those decisions.

There may be seasons in a marriage in which you need assistance from your parents, but this help should always be received as an adult and not as a dependent child. There should be a spirit of gratitude and not entitlement. Offer to pay back money lent to you. If you have to stay with your parents, set a date when you will leave, and make sure that you contribute to the household. Don’t complain about your spouse to your parents or invite them

into your conflicts and disagreements. Keep in mind that overdependence on parents will rob you of the strength you need as a couple to greet your future and forge your legacy.

Sometimes it’s the parents who have a hard time letting their married children leave. They offer unsolicited advice, they’re quick to criticize decisions and even get angry and pout when the couple doesn’t spend



Keep in mind that overdependence on parents will rob you of the strength you need as a couple to greet your future and forge your legacy.

as much time with them as they would like. But leaving is healthy and necessary for the marriage to thrive.

Second, *hold fast*. This expression comes from a Hebrew word that means to “stick” or to “attach.” But this is something we must *choose* to do. Marriage does not take place in a protected environment, cocooned from the forces of the world. The commitment and vows made on your wedding day will be tested and attacked.

Think about it. Every marriage brings together two sinful people who come with baggage. Couple this with a culture and environment that doesn’t exactly give a standing ovation for the biblical framework for marriage and, by the way, Satan’s desire to derail and destroy marriage and family. When we say, “I do,” we have to buckle our seat belts and determine to hold fast.

Holding fast to each other means that you have made the decision that no relationship on earth is more important than the relationship you have with each other as a couple. So we are to be vigilant and intentional in maintaining and protecting this core priority. Our children, parents, extended family, careers, and other interests that we feel passionate about should not take the place of the heart focus we have for each other in the marriage.

So many marriages fall apart because the relationship has been taken for granted, and couples are drawn toward other affections. Like the boat that is not secured to the dock, our default is to drift.

Holding fast also means to embrace mutual interdependence. This is not to be confused with an unhealthy codependence, which is a dysfunctional, excessive reliance on other people for approval and a sense of identity. But to be married is a declaration of need. We got married not because we wanted a roommate or we wanted

someone to propel us toward success. No, we got married because we could not live without that person. They met our aloneness need. They completed us.

This is healthy need, and holding fast declares that we continue to need each other. This need wasn't met when we sealed

To be married is a declaration of need.

the deal on the wedding day; it is an ongoing need for the warmth, love, and attention of the person we committed our lives to. We need to love and to be loved.


Stubborn independence is an expression of pride and will erect a wall between you and your marriage partner. To embrace our need for each other is an expression of humility that breaks down barriers in the relationship. This too is what it means to hold fast to each other.

Holding fast means mutual protection. Love covers and intentionally protects the one loved from exposure to danger and harm. It's not like the guy I saw on the news who was sitting in the stands next to his wife at a baseball game. A foul ball was heading their way and he ducked, but she got hit in the head. I bet she had a few things to say to him. Like, "Mr. Protector, why didn't you try to catch the ball or at least shield me from getting hit?"

To be married means, as the saying goes, that we have each other's backs. We will defend and fight for safety, protection, and the well-being of our marriage partner. We will take the hit in order to protect them. This means we will not knowingly allow anyone, including our children and parents or extended family, to trespass boundaries and to hurt the one we have committed our lives to.

Third, *become one flesh*. Adam and Eve celebrated their commitment to each other through sexual intercourse. And indeed,

this was pure, guiltless celebration. Look at Genesis 2:25: “And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.” No shame. Further, their sexual intimacy affirmed the message that they were one and committed to each other for the rest of their lives. Sex is the sign and seal of commitment and oneness in marriage.



True, soul-enriching intimacy takes time and tested commitment.

As important as sex is in a healthy marriage, intimacy (“become one flesh”) means so much more. Intimacy is a journey to be embraced. This is suggested by the expression “*shall* become one flesh” (emphasis added). Intimacy is an ongoing, growing knowing of each other. We are intimate and we are *becoming* intimate.

Over time our identities become so delightfully intertwined that we know and feel how the other person thinks and how they will respond. Our communication goes beyond words—a look, a glance, a touch says it all. This kind of intimacy has been built on trust and the exclusive pursuit of each other through the years. Love and passion come early on, but true, soul-enriching intimacy takes time and tested commitment. Acceptance has been chosen over rejection. The gift of forgiveness has washed away resentment. There is safety and the comfort of knowing that there is one person in the world who is committed to knowing me and yet loves me unconditionally. No performance necessary. Intimacy.

But remember, intimacy is a choice. We must be determined to pursue this ongoing, growing knowing of each other.

What Jesus Does

Intimacy, as important as it is, primarily is about us. But, as we have seen, marriage is also about mission, modeling, and passing

on the image of our great God from one generation to the next. Marriage, as the first institution, is intended to be the incarnation of God's plan and purposes for all of human history. Now I fully realize that thought was probably nowhere near our minds on our wedding day. But you can be assured it is front and center in God's mind.

Of course, we know that God's beautiful creation is marred by sin. When Adam and Eve sinned, everything about them was damaged, including their relationship with each other (Gen. 3). Guiltless peace and transparency were replaced with shame and secrecy. They covered themselves with leaves. They attempted to hide themselves from God in order to escape accountability for their disobedience. They passed blame on each other. But God indeed held them responsible and accountable for their sinful disobedience.

The damage had been done. Sin had blasted its way into human history and from this first couple forward we have been left reeling from the devastation of the impact of sin. Marriage, originally designed to reflect and steward the image of God from one generation to the next, now is contaminated. Competition and selfishness erode unity, and self-preservation dwarfs loving sacrifice. Through Adam and Eve's disobedience, the devil sought to damage and derail marriage and its mission.

But thank God for Jesus! God, through Christ, has paid the penalty for our sin, and through faith in Him, we have been restored to fellowship with God the Father and given the joy and privilege to live on mission for and with Him. This means that we are forgiven and empowered to be and do what God designed. Couples that are surrendered to the lordship of Christ have mar-

riages that have been realigned to God’s purposes and plan for marriage.

This is the message or statement that marriage is to make. Every marriage is to be a statement about the redemption, honor, and glory of our great Savior, Jesus Christ. It is our passion to build our marriage on, about, and through Him. There is no higher goal, dream, or ambition. And when we give ourselves to pursuing this vision, our marriage becomes God’s statement to a watching world during our moment in history as well as the breeding ground for hope for future generations.

What will we place in our children’s hands? When our children open their presents after their wedding ceremony, hopefully they will smile with the realization that their parents gave them the best gift they could have ever received—a vibrant, Christ-centered marriage.

Karen and I come from completely different backgrounds, but Jesus is our common ground, starting point, and the foundation for our lives and our marriage. Throughout this book, we want to share with you what God has been teaching us about marriage and its influence on future generations. But first, our stories . . .

To think about . . .

“Like the boat that is not secured in the dock, our default is to drift.” Are you aware of that tendency in your marriage? How can you prevent that “drift”?