

Resources for a Service on the Theme of Marriage as God's Gift



These could be used on the Sunday in National Marriage Week
or at some other time of year

Publicity

It is important to encourage everyone to come, whether married, never married, separated, divorced or widowed. Many churches fail to say anything about marriage because of fear of offending those who are not married but that needs changing. Everyone needs to know how to have a good marriage, not only the married. Any person who is not married may marry at some time but, in the meantime, all should wish (as most do) that those who are married should be helped in their marriages. Happy marriages are of great benefit to the church, society and the nation in many ways.

Flowers

It would be good to have a large display of white flowers, whatever other local traditions there may be.

SERVICE - Theme - Marriage As God's Gift

1) Ideas for opening:

Welcome all - married, never married, separated, divorced, widowed.

Invite them each to think for one minute of a married couple who have been a help to them, whether relatives or not, and how the couples have been of help. The service leader ends the minute with prayer, e.g. Thank you, Lord, for all you have given us through the lives and words of those of whom we have been thinking. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Then invite them each to think of one single person who has been a help to them, whether a relation or not, and how the person has been of help. The leader to end the minute with a similar prayer.

2) **Hymns**

The hymns associated with marriage are usually traditional ones. Even couples who know a wide range of songs often choose traditional hymns for their wedding, partly for the sake of those who are coming who do not often go to church.

Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven

Love Divine, all loves excelling

The Lord's my Shepherd

Lead us, Heavenly Father, lead us

Guide me, O Thou Great Redeemer

Lord of all hopefulness

Now thank we all our God

3) **Songs**

Whatever is appropriate from your church's repertoire; but only have a few, because visitors may not know any of them.

4) **Prayers**

(These can be used as written or adapted as desired)

Marriage Growth

We praise You heavenly Father that You have made mankind, and because it was not good for man to be alone, You created woman, and in marriage You join man and woman as one flesh, teaching us that those whom You have united should never be divided. We pray for all husbands and wives here today. Grant that each husband may love his wife as Christ loves His bride the Church, giving himself up for it, and grant that each wife may love and submit to her husband, as the Church should submit to Christ. May each be to the other a strength in need, a comfort in sorrow, and a companion in joy. May their marriage grow and deepen with the years and be an example of what you intend a marriage to be. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Love in action, and help to others married

God our Father, Giver of all that is good, we thank You for all the ways in which married couples grow in their understanding of each other, and thus in their marriage. We pray that they may continue to love each other in their thoughts, their words and their actions, and in what they refrain from thinking, saying and doing. Give them grace also we pray to be channels of your Holy Spirit's help to any who confide in them about difficulties in their marriage. We ask this in the name of Him who promised the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Children

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the children You have entrusted to those present to bring up for You. Continue, we pray, to protect them from all harm. Keep husbands and wives faithful in prayer for them. Enable each child to come to a living faith in You, and to find the good works You have prepared for them to do and to rejoice in doing them. We ask this in your Son's name. Amen.

As we grow older

Lord of our whole lives, You provide for all our needs from Your riches. Grant us Your help as we grow older. Help us to care for each other, whatever our latter years bring, to recognise when it is time to move home, and to accept when we should seek help from others. Above all, enable us to be ready for our passing through repentance and through faith in Your Son, and in His death on the Cross bearing our sins. So, help us to be eagerly longing to meet You face to face. We ask this in our Saviour's name.

Single people (including widow/ers)

Thank you Heavenly Father that Your grace is sufficient for all our needs. Grant that those who are living singly may find Your help in every circumstance. May they have fulfilling friendships and know your guidance as to whether they are to marry or remarry. We ask this through One Who, for Your sake, remained single, Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.

Divorcees

O God, Who has known the sadness of Your Son's death on the cross, have mercy we pray on those who have experienced the sadness of divorce. Give them the grace of forgiveness for their former spouse. Whenever it is possible, enable them to hope and pray and work for the restoration of their marriage. Assure all of them of Your love for them and guide them into Your paths for their life ahead. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

5) Bible Readings

Genesis 1 v 26 - 31 and 2 v 18 - 24

John 2 v 1 - 11

John 15 v 9 - 17

1 Corinthians 13

Ephesians 3 v 14 -21

Ephesians 5 v 22 - 33

1 John 4 v 7 - 12

1 Corinthians 13 Dialogue

(To be read by two people – one reading the straight words and one the italics. Readers need to practice well so the end result is smooth and meaningful.)

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels,
but have not love,
I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.
And all my elegant words come back to me, empty and hollow.

If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I
have faith that can move mountains,
but have not love,
I am nothing.
And all my brilliance is wasted, because I never took the time to care for others.

If I give all I possess to the poor, and surrender my body to the flames,
but have not love,
I gain nothing.
And everything I have sacrificed has been just a shallow show.

Love is patient
even when someone takes a long time to respond to God's love

Love is kind
and loves gently, even when others do unlovable things

Love does not envy
and is happy to take a servant role when the lead is given to someone else

Love does not boast
Instead of putting self forward, love looks for ways to show encouragement to those who are struggling

Love is not rude
It shows respect for others even when they have very different ways of doing things

Love is not self-seeking
Love puts aside its own needs for a while so it can freely meet the needs of others

Love is not easily angered
It calmly looks for peaceful solutions

Love keeps no record of wrongs
but has a very short memory of the times when it has been hurt or rejected

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth
Love keeps on looking for the good in everyone and everything

Love always protects
And so it helps others to feel safe

Love always trusts
love takes risks and believes the best in everyone

Love always hopes
knowing that the future can hold many miracles

Love always perseveres
and keeps on working at the relationship, even when it would be so easy to give up

Love never fails
But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away
But a bond of love can bind hearts together forever

For we know in part and we prophesy in part,
But when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears
Because something better has been discovered

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child.
But when I became a man, I put childish ways behind me
Because I had found better ways to talk and think and reason

Now we see but a poor reflection,
then we shall see face to face
Because we will be ushered into the very presence of our loving God

Now I know in part,
then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known
And at last I will be able to comprehend the full height and depth and breadth of God's eternal love for me

And now these three remain, faith, hope and love.
But the greatest of these is love
So receive God's love for you, fill every corner of your heart with His love, and then let it overflow, freely and joyfully, on everyone you meet

6) **Skits on having children**

Skits are great fun as well as a powerful way to stimulate discussion and couple dialogue. Scripture has preserved bits and pieces of the lives of a number of fathers and mothers and their marriages. God has left us these stories to be told and retold because they draw back the curtain on couples facing the real life challenges of parenting. Parenting can both strengthen and put great strain on marriage relationships. Most couples with children experience both kinds of seasons. These stories from the married life of Bible couples can connect us with the wisdom of the past. As we lift the curtain and see them living out their lives as marriage partners and parents, we can make application to our lives today.

These skits and the thought questions that follow may be used as discussion starters for marriage enrichment growth experiences for couples, as part of a worship service, as openers to generate dialogue between parents and youth in a Sabbath School or youth meeting, in evangelism, as a prayer meeting series, etc. The reflective exercises included after each drama script are designed for couples to share privately, either “knee to knee” as part of couple time during a seminar, or at home.

Of course, these are only a few of the skits that might have been written from the lives of Bible couples with children. You may want to write some of your own that lend themselves to thinking about issues especially meaningful for your time and place.

Each of the six skits has been provided below so that the page it will print out on a fresh sheet or two of A4

Skit 1: We're Pregnant!: Manoah and Angela's* Story [Judges 13-16]

*Scripture does not tell us her name.

Angela: (*Speaking excitedly, but with some reservation.*) "Manoah, I think we're pregnant! I mean, I'm quite sure we are, but we've prayed for this for so long I'm still afraid to believe it, for fear it might not be true!"

Manoah: "Oh Angela! You're really serious, aren't you! (*Manoah gives Angela a big hug, then takes her by the shoulders and holds her at arms length while he barrages her with questions.*) We're going to have a baby? Well, are you sure? How do you know? Oh what am I talking about. Women always know about these things! (*Hugs her again, then takes her hands and starts to dance around the floor.*)

Angela: "Oh Manoah! I'm so excited. I've wanted a baby more than anything for as long as I can remember! But all of a sudden I'm scared too. What have we asked for, Manoah? What have we done? Think of the responsibility. I don't know if I can do this! Our lives will never be the same again!"

Manoah: "I know. My mind is just reeling too. But God gave us this baby, I'm sure He did. Let's just pray together—for our baby, for us—right now before we get any further into this venture. (*Kneeling together.*) "O Lord, I beg you, . . . teach us how to bring up the [baby] who is to be born"

Group Discussion

1. Invite couples to share voluntarily their thoughts and feelings when they learned they were pregnant for the first time.
2. How did having a child change your lives as a married couple forever?
3. What are some of the blessings having children has brought into your lives together?
4. Knowing the rest of the story of Sampson [see Judges 13-16], what stresses and strains do you think being his parents put on the marriage of Manoah and Angela?
5. What comfort and encouragement for parents can be found in the end of this story?

Couple Reflections

1. Times when you have been a great source of encouragement to me as a parent . . .
2. Changes I couldn't have anticipated that becoming parents brought into our lives . . .
3. Times when the stresses and strains of parenting have impacted our marriage . . .
4. Courage I draw from the story of Manoah and Angela . . .
5. A prayer I would like to share with you—for us as a couple, for us as parents, for our children . . .

Skit 2: Managing Anxiety: Amram and Jochebed [Exodus 2:1-11]

Jochebed: (*Seated in a rocking chair, holding a baby.*) “Oh Amram, isn’t he beautiful! Look at those feet. You can see already he’s going to be tall like his father. And those bright eyes. He doesn’t miss a thing! I just can’t believe we did this—you and me together!”

Amram: “He is a fine lad indeed! Who could have anticipated how you’d feel when he fell asleep on your chest or curled his little fingers around yours . . . It’s just so amazing!”

Jochebed: “Oh Amram, I’m so happy and so scared at the same time! What if the soldiers find him? It has been bad enough living in hiding these last few months, concealing my pregnancy, unable to share our joy, afraid a slip of the tongue would give away our secret. But now I live in terror! Every time he makes a peep, my stomach knots. I wake up in a cold sweat from the most horrible nightmares, of soldiers wrestling him from my arms”

Amram: (*Reaching out to comfort his wife.*) “I know Darling. This is a nightmare in real life. I’ve been through a million plans in my mind, but I haven’t been able to settle on anything practical. There’s always a reason it’s too risky, or just won’t work.”

Jochebed: (*Urgently.*) “Well, risk or no, we’ve got to do something! Amram, I can’t keep him quiet any more! He’s starting to coo, and babies do cry, even when you’ve done everything . . . ! Look, I know I wanted a baby, but I really don’t know what we were thinking. . . . Well, *I’ve been* thinking. . . . Promise me you’ll hear me out. What if we put him in a basket and hid him in the reeds at the river’s edge. There are many sounds along the river. Maybe a baby’s cry would be lost among them. And we could send Miriam to play nearby and keep watch. I know it’s risky, but I don’t see us having a lot of choices. So unless you have a better idea . . . I’ve nearly finished weaving a basket.” (*Amram just looks at her, not sure how to respond.*)

Group Discussion

1. What dangers lurk in your time and place that threaten the well-being, if not the very lives of your children?
2. How does living with the realities of these risks affect the stress levels of married couples?
3. Why is a strong marriage relationship so important to the safeguarding of the physical, emotional and spiritual well-being of children?
4. How does the life narrative of Moses bring encouragement and hope to parents and families concerned for the physical, emotional and spiritual well-being of the children God has given them?

Couple Reflection

1. Times when I have been able to enjoy our children as God’s wonderful creation . . .
2. Thanks you deserve for the way you have mothered/fathered our children . . .
3. Times when I am most afraid for their well-being . . . and ours as husband and wife . . .
4. Ways I wish we could stand together to support, protect, and prepare them for the realities of life in this world . . .

Skit 3: Growing Together, Growing Apart: Isaac and Rebekah [Genesis 27]

Rebekah: (*Rebekah stands apart, angled away from Isaac who sits hunched over in a chair, leaning on his staff.*) “I just hate it when he goes silent! How can you share with a person, reason with a person, when there’s no response? He knows as well as I do the will of God in this matter. And it’s perfectly obvious God knew what He was doing! Esau is not fit to receive the birthright blessing. He’s headstrong, he’s unrestrained, and he’s married to those two heathen women who make my life miserable. But Isaac will not listen to reason or revelation! And now he won’t even talk to me about it.” (*Turning and gesturing to Isaac.*) “Look at him over there, bent over more by his burdens than old age. I do everything I can to care for him, but there’s no joy in our lives any more.”

Isaac: (*In a shaky voice.*) “It’s a hard thing, getting old . . . feeling time close in around you . . . looking back . . . knowing . . . wishing . . . Looking ahead . . . feeling trapped and pressured . . . and so alone! Oh, I have a good wife and a prosperous household. But I have nobody to talk to who would really understand. I just have to do what I have to do by myself. . . . I have loved my wife from the day I laid eyes on her. I wish I could talk to her. But there’s just no point. It’s easier to keep my thoughts to myself. We have fought about this thing with Jacob and Esau so many times. . . . Oh, how I hate fighting! No matter how clear my thoughts are in my mind, I’m no match for her in an argument! Her thoughts fly like arrows, and my mind goes numb. She’s always saying, ‘God told me this and God told me that.’ And who can argue with a message from God? But if God had really wanted me to bless Jacob, why didn’t he tell *me* and not *her*? Never mind. No one will fault me! Tradition is on my side. I *will* bless my firstborn whom I love before I die! (*Sigh.*) I only wish . . .

Group Discussion

1. Genesis specifically records that from the beginning Isaac loved Rebekah (cf. Genesis 24:66). What is it about becoming parents that can cause a couple who love each other deeply to drift apart?
2. People who know about families and how they function observe that the forming of an inappropriate alliance between a parent and a child is often a signal that things are not going well in the marriage. What evidence do you see in the relationships between Isaac and Esau, Rebekah and Jacob, that signal the reality that things are not going well in the marriage?
3. Why do you think Isaac and Rebekah have stopped communicating?
4. How do Isaac and Rebekah resolve the conflicts between them? What problems do you see with Rebekah’s methods? With Isaac’s? How are the children caught in the middle? How might they better resolve their differences?
5. Solomon has great confidence that true love can weather many storms. Read Song of Solomon 8:6, 7. Why is love such a powerful bond? How might Isaac and Rebekah still draw upon their love to bring them together?

Couple Reflections

1. The love I felt for you when we were first married . . .
2. Times when the children and parenting them have come between us . . .
3. Ways our love for each other has sustained us through these difficult experiences . . .
4. Ways I can strengthen our communication and our ability to resolve conflicts in ways that meet the needs of us both and that do not use our children as pawns . . .
5. My commitment of love to you as long as life lasts . . .

Skit 4: Better Than Ten Sons: Elkanah and Hannah [1 Samuel 1:1-8]

- Elkanah: (*Whistling to himself.*) “Where has the year gone. . . . I can’t believe it’s time to make our way to Shiloh again. What can I say? I am a man most blessed! I will prepare a sacrifice to the Lord with thanksgiving! And this year” (*Hannah approaches from behind him.*) “Oh, Hannah, you frightened me. What can I do for you, my dear?”
- Hannah: “I just wanted to be with you for awhile. Can I do something to help?”
- Elkanah: “Well, I’m just making preparation for our trip to Shiloh. Could you bring me that sack over there? I’m trying not to leave everything to the last minute. You know how hectic it gets with the children and all.” (*Hannah’s eyes drop to the floor. She says nothing as she retrieves the sack and hands it to Elkanah. Elkanah doesn’t seem to notice. Hannah recovers her composure and speaks.*)
- Hannah: “I love going to Shiloh. There’s something so peaceful about the temple. I love to go there to pray.”
- Elkanah: “You bring a wonderful spiritual sensitivity to our family, Hannah. . . . Can you bring me the ball of string from that nail? I want to tie this up very securely. You know little Ben will want to carry something. . . .” (*Hannah again drops her eyes. As she goes for the string, she fights back tears, wiping her eyes with the corner of her apron. Again, Elkanah is oblivious and chuckles to himself as he continues.*) “Remember last year when Ben tried to pick up his sack and slipped in the mud, spilling himself and everything from the sack onto the ground? I thought Peninnah was going to Hannah, what’s the matter? Why Hannah, you’re crying!” (*Elkanah moves toward her and puts his arm around her shoulders.*)
- Hannah: (*Struggling to speak.*) “Never mind. I’ll be okay.” (*She buries her head in his shoulder and begins to cry aloud despite her best attempts to stay composed.*)
- Elkanah: (*Exasperated.*) “You’re jealous of Peninnah again, aren’t you. Haven’t I told you I love you with or without children? What more do you need?”
- Hannah: “It’s just that it hurts so much to watch Peninnah with her children. I don’t begrudge her children, it’s just that I want *us* to have children, Elkanah.”
- Elkanah: “Some things you just have to accept, Hannah. We’ve tried everything the midwives have told us. Just be thankful it doesn’t matter that much to me. Some men would have divorced you, but I love you and I can deal with this. You just have to”
- Hannah: “But I’ve prayed and prayed. I just can’t understand why it’s not happening! And when she makes her snide remarks, it cuts to the bone.”
- Elkanah: “There, there, Hannah. I should have picked up on this earlier. You haven’t been eating lately. But how many times do we have to talk about it? If Peninnah is making life hard for you, all you have to do is come and tell me everything. I will take care of her. And as for you, I tell you every day I love you. And don’t I give you double portions at every meal? Don’t I spend special time with you? What more can I do? What do you want from me? Aren’t I more to you than ten sons? I tell you what. We’ll see the best midwife in Shiloh when we’re there. We’ll get you pregnant yet! And if never mind. God will answer your prayers.”

Group Discussion

1. What do you understand about the pain of childlessness?
2. What unique strains are placed on a marriage when a couple wants and prays for a child, but no pregnancy is forthcoming?
3. Which responses from Elkanah are the most helpful? Which are less helpful?
4. What does Hannah really need from Elkanah? From the rest of the family? From the community around them?
5. How could Elkanah better convey his love by listening and accepting Hannah, rather than offering solutions?

Couple Reflections

1. Times when you have listened to and accepted me, and made me feel completely understood . . .
2. Times when God didn't seem to be listening and you ministered to me in disappointment, discouragement, grief . . .
3. Disappointments and losses we must somehow cope with together . . .
4. Ways I would like to be there for you in moments of pain . . .

Skit 5: Table Talk: A Fictitious Meeting of Eunice, Lois and Mary Over Lunch [Acts 12:11-12, 25; 13:4-6, 13; 15:36-40; 2 Timothy 4:11 and 2 Timothy 1:2, 5, 13; 2:1-3; 1 Timothy 1:2, 18; 5:20]

Mary: “I can tell you, raising John Mark by myself has not been easy. He’s a good boy, but I have worried a lot over the years about the absence of male role models in his life. Of course my family has done what they could to help, but a single mother raising a boy alone has these concerns.”

Eunice: “Yes, I’m sure it has been difficult. I remember when my mother and I became Christians. I prayed so hard for my husband. I wanted so much for him to join us and share our joy—for himself, for us as a couple, and for Timothy! My husband is a good man. He provides well for us, and I know he loves us. But he just hasn’t grasped the good news. There are so many things that seem to create barriers to his making a decision to follow Jesus. I pray for him every day, and I try to be the best wife I can to him, but I don’t know For now, thank God, Timothy is very happy in the church. He has many friends among the other young people . . .”

Lois: And thank God for men in the church like Paul who have taken such an interest in these boys. He’s been like a second father to Timothy. When he talks to him about spiritual things, Timothy really listens. The boys just seem to sense that he is really interested in them personally and in what they are thinking and doing.

Mary: Yes, I’ll be forever grateful to him for taking John Mark on that mission trip. I know my son got homesick and came home early—that was really hard for Paul to understand—but there was also Barnabas who saw John Mark’s potential and gave him another chance. Now even Paul affirms John Mark’s strengths. It makes him feel so special and important to the church.

Lois: There’s something about this church that is so caring, so supportive, so helpful. I don’t know how I would have made it through the tough times without them. I couldn’t begin to enumerate the times the church members have come through with practical help just when it was needed.

Eunice: And with my husband . . . the church leaders have helped me see the importance of finding every possible way I can be part of his life, even as I participate actively in church life as well. The couples at church have been great about including us socially, too. Their friendships fill a real void in our lives. My husband really likes a lot of them. I think it’s because he can tell they like him too.

Mary: It’s amazing, isn’t it, how the gospel has changed every dimension of our lives. I have never experienced this kind of community spirit before. Truly there is no evidence of the power of the gospel like the love the Christians in this place have for one another. I know. I have felt it, and you have too. Somehow I think that when we all meet in the Kingdom, we will know we are there together because of the love we have found in this church. Life isn’t easy, but it sure helps when you know you’re not alone!

Continued

Group Discussion

1. What hurdles confront couples where one spouse is not a Christian? How does the presence of children in the home make mixed faith marriage more challenging?
2. Why is it important for the church to intentionally work to strengthen marriages, all the more when one spouse has yet to experience the joys of the gospel and the community of faith?
3. How can Christian couples demonstrate love and care and support for all the couples whose lives they touch?

Couple Reflections

1. Strengths of our marriage which open the way for us to minister to other couples . .
2. Times when we have needed support as a couple . . .
3. Things that couples in the church said or did—or might have said or done—to be helpful during these times . . .
4. Couples we sense need our love and support . . .
5. Things we can do to reach out to fold them into the fellowship of other couples and the community of faith . . .

Skit 6: Child of Promise: Boaz and Ruth (Ruth 4:13-22)

Naomi: (*Picking up a baby from a blanket on the floor and holding him close as she rocks him in her arms.*) “Now, now little one. It’s time for your nap. Sh-h-h-h. Close your eyes. Yes, you’re Grandma’s little precious one, you are.” (*Humming a lullaby as she continues to put the baby to sleep, then turning to address the audience with a personal monologue.*) “So much has changed in the last year I can hardly picture myself as I returned to Bethlehem scarcely a barley season ago. Hmmm! My friends in the village did well to accept me in all my bitterness and anger against God and the world! And Ruth . . . what a daughter she has been to me. I’m not proud of what I said when she insisted on coming back to Bethlehem with me. ‘Your people will be my people,’ she said with such compassion.

“My response was vitriolic: ‘What people? Can’t you see, I’m an old woman. My husband and my sons are dead! My womb is barren! There will be no more people!’

“‘And your God my God!’ she continued in an amazing affirmation of faith for a Moabitess.

“‘What a God He has turned out to be,’ was my reply.

“Who could have dreamed I would be smiling this morning into the face of Ruth’s baby—the pain of the loss of my husband and sons comforted, my day bright and full of joy, and my future sure. And all because of the provision of the kinsman-redeemer.

“What a fine son that Boaz is to me. On the first day when Ruth returned from the fields and told me where she had gleaned that day, I knew he was up to something good. And from that day forward his generosity knew no bounds! The love he has showered upon my Ruth and me could be the inspiration for poetry! Everyday she told me of his provision, his attentiveness, his care, his thoughtfulness, his words of encouragement, his affirmation, his commitment, his love. And even as she was falling in love with him, I felt my own anger and bitterness giving way to anticipation and joy.

“Don’t worry, I told her. He is our near kinsman, and he will not rest until the matter is settled. You will be his, and he will be yours forever. Just you wait and see!’ Their wedding day was the happiest day of my life, until the birth of this little one. Just look at him. (*She pauses and smiles.*) I wonder if he might one day be the Messiah, or the father, or the grandfather of the Messiah If ever there was a child of promise, this is one”

Discussion Questions

1. Read the book of Ruth. What evidence do you find of the deep love relationship that grew between Boaz and Ruth? Note especially his gestures of kindness and support in chapter 2; his protection and care in 3:9-14; his extravagant love gift in 3:15; and his brilliant plan for securing her hand as his beloved wife in chapter 4.
2. How does knowing that Boaz is a type of Christ enrich your understanding of the love story between Boaz and Ruth and your understanding of God’s love poured out to us in Christ?
3. How is the birth of baby Obed a living illustration of the wise man’s words, “Children are a heritage from the Lord Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them”? (Proverbs 127:3-5).

Couple Reflections

1. When I think about the highpoints in our love story, I remember . . .
2. Ways you have shown your love to me which have meant so much . . .
3. Ways in which our children have brought joy and blessing into our lives . . .
4. Courage I draw from difficult seasons we have successfully navigated together . . .

7) Teen Time

Based on Genesis 2 v 4b –9, 15-25

Start up Question: Which has been your best birthday so far?

Answers will perhaps include a really good party with friends, a birthday present that was just what was longed for, a great family time.

A really good birthday will almost certainly involve other people. Someone knowing you well enough to buy the right gift; being encouraged by family or friends to feel this is your special day; being thought of by others who sent cards.

It does not feel quite so good to celebrate a birthday alone. Choosing, buying and paying for something yourself does not have quite the same effect as being given that same thing as a gift. Posting a card to yourself does not have the same effect as receiving happy birthday greetings from someone else.

Read Genesis 2 v 4b – 9, 15-25

At the beginning of creation God provided for all our needs.

Put yourself in Adam's place

You are living in a perfect world

You possess everything

You are number 1

You are in a perfect relationship with God

There is no sin

Despite all that is good, God says to Adam that it is not good that he is alone.

When have you been alone and what did it feel like?

Answers may range from deeply hurtful times of being alone to more common experiences such as the first day at a new school/job. We can feel alone even when, or perhaps especially when, we are surrounded by other people if we don't feel they care about us.

Using whatever means is best for you (words, pictures, stick figures, feeling faces) describe to one other person a time of being alone.

Some questions to discuss

Does God care when we are lonely or left out?

Throughout the Bible we hear about God's love for His people and his longing for His people to love one another. God's care for Adam included not only noticing that Adam was missing out without human companionship, but also providing that human companionship for him. God provided Adam with a wife, Eve. Adam is no longer alone. How do you think he feels now?

Why are relationships so important?

Only relationships will remove aloneness. Marriage is the first relationship that God created. He also gave us the relationships of the family and the church. Each is a gift from God that we might not only know His love but also care for another. It is not His plan for everyone to marry, our families may not always be there for us in the way we need, but additionally God gives His church to provide friendship and care.

Why does God care about marriage?

Marriage offers lifelong commitment and companionship, enabling two people to share what life brings. Marriage lived the way God intended means we are not alone. If that commitment is broken we may find ourselves alone in the most difficult times of our lives.

God cares for you.

God offers you His friendship and promises to be with you whatever you face in life. In addition he

has made us so that we cannot survive entirely on our own – we need others. God gives us other

people to share in His caring. Sometimes we prefer to think we can manage on our own

When do you need other people (friends or family) most? When do you find it hard to admit to needing others?

Conclusion

God's creation is good. He provides everything for our good. Marriage is one of God's good things. How might we better value and look after His gift?

8. For Adults - Group Discussion/Activity

Download and discuss in a group the Marriage Resource page on www.marriageresource.org.uk "Twenty Steps to Happy Marriage" (the first ten steps are pre-wedding, the second ten for marriage couples).

For couples preparing for marriage, download and discuss the Marriage Resource web page "Why Pay the Earth for Your Wedding?"

Download and discuss any of the following Marriage Resource web pages "Five Keys to a Lasting Marriage", "Living Together Successfully", "Marriage Under Pressure", Marriage Milestones leaflets: "The First Child", "Early Disillusionment", "Redundancy", "Role Reversal", "When the Last Child Leaves Home", "Retirement".

Obtain and discuss a Marriage First Aid booklet (on how to respond to someone who confides their marriage problems to you). Obtainable free while stocks last from 7, Bay Close, Swanage, Dorset BH19 1RE - send SAE (One weighs 30g excluding envelope).

Download from www.marriageresource.org.uk and discuss the Marriage Resource paper "Chastity - The Teaching of the Bible".

Hold a Marriage Thanksgiving and Rededication Service. Details of how to do this can be found on the above website.

9. Sermon: Ideas for Structure and Content

Genesis 1: God made man and woman -

- i) to increase in number until the earth is full
- ii) to rule over the rest of His creation
- iii) to eat of seed-bearing plants and trees

Male and female are equal in importance. Together they reflect God's image. All God had made was very good.

Genesis 2: God made woman to be man's helper/companion. They complement each other.

Man and woman leave their parental homes. Their new relationship must now come first. They "unite" (literally in the Hebrew are stuck/glued together) into a life-long partnership - marriage. Then they become "one flesh". Flesh means the whole of the person. Husband and wife are united in all respects. Sexual intercourse should not begin until marriage, then it expresses that unity.

The Lord Jesus said: "So they are no longer two but one. Therefore, what God has joined together let man not separate" (except for unrepentant marital unfaithfulness). (Matthew 19)

How can we make best use of God's good gift of marriage?

- 1) By preparing well for it. If people spent as long preparing for their marriage as they do for their wedding, there would be many more happy marriages. Engaged couples need to find a good course of marriage preparation, like the widely-used course provided by Holy Trinity, Brompton, London www.relationshipcentral.org/marriage-preparation-course preferably including a pre-marriage questionnaire (inventory) like PREPARE www.prepare-enrich.co.uk . They should also find an older couple to be their confidential mentors, with whom they meet at first every six months and later yearly, to share the ups and downs of their marriage.
- 2) By giving their marriage a service from time to time. For example, read and discuss a book about marriage, or watch and discuss a video about marriage; go on a week-night marriage course, or a marriage enhancement weekend.
- 3) By asking for confidential help with any difficulties before the difficulties begin to threaten the marriage.

Marriage has been described as having four Rs and the last two are alternatives. Marriage begins with Romance, with rose-tinted spectacles. Marriage then moves into Reality and the spectacles come off. Later marriage moves into the third stage, either Resignation (which can lead to disaster) or Reconstruction.

Marriage needs five Cs - Commitment, nothing is going to break us apart. Confession, the ability to say sorry. Communication, listening carefully and considering our spouse's point of view. Conflict solving, using all possible solutions and trying the one which seems best. Companionship, sharing at least some common interests and activities as well as having fun together.

10) Sermon Illustrations

Adam and Eve had an ideal marriage. He didn't have to hear about all the men she could have married and she didn't have to hear about the way his mother cooked. (Anon)

An advertisement in a lonely hearts column: "Ugly, boring, penniless middle-aged male seeks beautiful, witty, rich young lady - because opposites get on well." (Anon)

In the days of steam trains a trainee (excuse pun) was travelling on the footplate of a locomotive on the way to London. As the train approached Brixton the driver, who was nearing retirement but who was known as a splendid time-keeper, handed over the controls to his fireman, got out an oil-lamp, lit it and leaned out of the footplate, waving it slowly up and down. Then he blew it out, put it away and took over the engine again. The fireman explained to the trainee: "Always does that, it's for his wife. He's done that for nearly forty years". (The Great Days of the Express Trains)

"Marriage remains a basic building block of any society and the surest foundation of secure family life. It is God's gift to humanity, designed both for human happiness and the nurture of children, a conviction which Christians share with those of many other faiths." (Archbishop George Carey at the Golden Wedding of Her Majesty the Queen and His Royal Highness Prince Philip)

Various researchers in recent years have shown marriage to be best for people's physical health, mental health, earning power, safety from violence in the home, sexual satisfaction, freedom from addictions, faithfulness, longevity and happiness. They have also shown that the average children of a married couple have better physical and mental health, do better at school, get better jobs, are less likely to be involved in drug taking, truancy or crime and have a better chance of a happy marriage themselves. Two sources for such research are: "Marriage Lite" by Patricia Morgan, The Institute for Civil Society and "The Case for Marriage" by Linda J Waite and Maggie Gallagher, Doubleday New York.

In the 1930s older men regarded the motor car with some suspicion and misgivings. How it worked was beyond their comprehension. Of one old man it was said: "What went on under his car's bonnet was as much of a mystery to him as what went on under his wife's bonnet". (From "The Lost Village" by Ralph Whitlock)

A Vicar was showing a guest around a church when they met a man and woman putting up Christmas decorations. Afterwards the guest asked: "What relationship are that couple to each other?" "Oh", said the Vicar, "didn't you realise they are husband and wife?" "No," the guest replied, "they were so polite to each other." (Edward Pratt)

"The key to happiness in marriage is to help your spouse enjoy being married to you and to do so continually." (Edward Pratt)

11) **Ending**

Heavenly Father, Who created marriage for the good of mankind and Who calls the Church to be the Heavenly Bride of Your Son, unite us in endeavour to help marriages fulfil what You desire for each one, and may Your Presence, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with each of us, married or single, day by day. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

12) **Questions and Points for Prayer**

Questions for married couples on their own at a time which is good for both of them. Each spouse to ask the other each question, one question at a time.

- 1) How can I help you enjoy being married to me more than you are? Only one answer is to be given to this question at any one time. On receiving the answer, the questioner is not to make any immediate response, except to ask for any clarification or elaboration by the answerer. The questioner is then to reflect on the answer in his or her own time and take appropriate action in due course.

The couple can each ask the other the same question a week later, again giving only one answer, with the same "rules" as above.

- 2) What would you like us to do together - either something we do not do at present, or more of something we only do a little?
- 3) Is there any problem in our marriage which we need to discuss with another couple in confidence? If so, with whom?

Questions for a group

- 1) How could our church do more for marriages? You might like to download and discuss the page from the website www.marriageresource.org.uk "Taking Marriage Seriously in Your Church"
- 2) If a Christian wishes to find somebody to marry, would it be right to use an agency which sought to introduce such Christian people (not just a dating agency)? What else might he/she do?
- 3) How would you advise an engaged couple to find marriage preparation?
- 4) If someone confided in you that their marriage was in difficulties, what would you do?
- 5) The preacher said "....." (insert anything he said which a group member wishes to discuss). Does the group agree?

Points for prayer

- 1) Your church's present marriage ministries.
- 2) Guidance for your minister and church leaders as to how to develop them further.
- 3) Couples from your church to offer to help with marriage work, even if it involves them giving up some other tasks in the church.
- 4) Couples preparing for marriage and those recently married.
- 5) For teaching about marriage in schools and young people's organisations.

Many more suggestions for prayer can be found in the Marriage Resource Prayer Diary at www.marriageresource.org.uk

Material supplied by Edward Pratt, Karen Holford, Christine Mort and Zillah Chester of Marriage Resource, and Ron and Karen Flowers (Section 6).