

# THE SURPASSING GOAL: MARRIAGE LIVED FOR THE GLORY OF GOD

*John Piper*

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**M**y topic for this chapter is “Marriage lived for the glory of God.” The decisive word in that topic is the word “for.” “Marriage lived *for* the glory of God.” The topic is not: “The glory of God *for* the living of marriage.” And not: “Marriage lived *by* the glory of God.” But: “Marriage lived *for* the glory of God.”

This little word means that there is an order of priority. There is an order of ultimacy. And the order is plain: God is ultimate and marriage is not. God is the most important Reality; marriage is less important—far less important, infinitely less important. Marriage exists to magnify the truth and worth and beauty and greatness of God; God does not exist to magnify marriage. Until this order is vivid and valued—until it is seen and savored—marriage will not be experienced as a revelation of God’s glory but as a rival of God’s glory.

I take my topic, “Marriage lived for the glory of God,” to be an answer to the question: Why marriage? Why is there marriage? Why does marriage exist? Why do we live in marriages? This means that my topic is part of a larger question: Why does anything exist? Why do you exist? Why does sex exist? Why do earth and sun and moon and stars exist? Why do animals and plants and oceans and mountains

and atoms and galaxies exist? The answer to all these questions, including the one about marriage is: All of them exist to and for the glory of God.

That is, they exist to magnify the truth and worth and beauty and greatness of God. Not the way a *microscope* magnifies, but the way a *telescope* magnifies. Microscopes magnify by making tiny things look bigger than they are. Telescopes magnify by making unimaginably big things look like what they really are. Microscopes move the appearance of size away from reality. Telescopes move the appearance of size toward reality. When I say that all things exist to magnify the truth and worth and beauty and greatness of God, I mean that all things—and marriage in particular—exist to move the appearance of God in people’s minds toward Reality.

God is unimaginably great and infinitely valuable and unsurpassed in beauty. “Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable” (Ps. 145:3, ESV). Everything that exists is meant to magnify that Reality. God cries out through the prophet Isaiah (43:6-7, ESV), “Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created *for my glory*” (emphasis added). We have been created to display the glory of God. Paul concludes the first eleven chapters of his great letter to the Romans with the exaltation of God as the source and end of all things: “For from him and through him and *to him* are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” (11:36, ESV, emphasis added). He makes it even clearer in Colossians 1:16, where he says, “By [Christ] all things were created, in heaven and on earth . . . all things were created through him and *for him*” (emphasis added).

And woe to us if we think that “for Him” means “for His need,” or “for His benefit,” or “for His improvement.” Paul made it crystal clear in Acts 17:25 that God is not “served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything” (ESV). No, the term “for His glory” and “for Him” means, “for the display of His glory,” or “for the showing of His glory,” or “for the magnifying of His glory.”

We need to let this sink in. Once there was God, and only God.

The universe is His creation. It is not coeternal with God. It is not God. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . All things were made through him” (John 1:1, 3, ESV). All things. All that is not God was made by God. So once there was only God.

Therefore God is absolute Reality. We are not. The universe is not. Marriage is not. We are derivative. The universe is of secondary importance, not primary. The human race is not the ultimate reality, nor the ultimate value, nor the ultimate measuring rod of what is good or what is true or what is beautiful. God is. God is the one ultimate absolute in existence. Everything else is from Him and through Him and for Him.

That is the starting place for understanding marriage. If we get this wrong, everything goes wrong. And if we get it right—really right, in our heads and in our hearts—then marriage will be transformed by it. Marriage will become what it was created by God to be—a display of the truth and worth and beauty and greatness of God.

This leads to a very simple conclusion—so simple and yet so far-reaching. If we want to see marriage have the place in the world and in the church that it is supposed to have—that is, if we want marriage to glorify the truth and worth and beauty and greatness of God—we must teach and preach less about marriage and more about God.

Most young people today do not bring to their courtship and marriage a great vision of God—who He is, what He is like, how He acts. In the world there is almost no vision of God. He is not even on the list to be invited. He is simply and breathtakingly omitted. And in the church the view of God that young couples bring to their relationship is so small instead of huge, and so marginal instead of central, and so vague instead of clear, and so impotent instead of all-determining, and so uninspiring instead of ravishing, that when they marry, the thought of living marriage to the glory of God is without meaning and without content.

What would the “glory of God” mean to a young wife or husband who gives almost no time and no thought to knowing the glory of God, or the glory of Jesus Christ, His divine Son . . .

- the glory of His *eternality* that makes the mind want to explode with the infinite thought that God never had a beginning, but simply always was;
- the glory of His *knowledge* that makes the Library of Congress look like a matchbox and quantum physics like a first grade reader;
- the glory of His *wisdom* that has never been and can never be counseled by men;
- the glory of His *authority* over heaven and earth and hell, without whose permission no man and no demon can move one inch;
- the glory of His *providence* without which not one bird falls to the ground or a single hair turns gray;
- the glory of His *word* that upholds the universe and keeps all the atoms and molecules together;
- the glory of His *power* to walk on water, cleanse lepers, heal the lame, open the eyes of the blind, cause the deaf to hear, still storms with a word, and raise the dead;
- the glory of His *purity* never to sin, or to have a two-second bad attitude or evil thought;
- the glory of His *trustworthiness* never to break His word or let one promise fall to the ground;
- the glory of His *justice* to render all moral accounts in the universe settled either on the cross or in hell;
- the glory of His *patience* to endure our dullness for decade after decade;
- the glory of His sovereign, slave-like *obedience* to embrace the excruciating pain of the cross willingly;
- the glory of His *wrath* that will one day cause people to call out for the rocks and the mountains to fall on them;
- the glory of His *grace* that justifies the ungodly; and
- the glory of His *love* that dies for us even while we were sinners.

How are people going to live their lives so that their marriages display the truth and worth and beauty and greatness of this glory, when they devote almost no energy or time to knowing and cherishing this glory?

Perhaps you can see why over the last twenty years of pastoral ministry I have come to see my life-mission and the mission of our church in some very basic terms: namely, I exist—we exist—to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples. That's our assessment of the need. Until there is a passion for the supremacy and the glory of God in the hearts of married people, marriage will not be lived for the glory of God.

And there will not be a passion for the supremacy and the glory of God in the hearts of married people until God Himself, in His manifold glories, is known. And He will not be known in His manifold glories until pastors and teachers speak of Him tirelessly and constantly and deeply and biblically and faithfully and distinctly and thoroughly and passionately. Marriage lived for the glory of God will be the fruit of churches permeated with the glory of God.

So I say again, if we want marriage to glorify the truth and worth and beauty and greatness of God, we must teach and preach less about marriage and more about God. Not that we preach too much on marriage, but that we preach too little on God. God is simply not magnificently central in the lives of most of our people. He is not the sun around which all the planets of our daily lives are held in orbit and find their proper, God-appointed place. He is more like the moon, which waxes and wanes, and you can go for nights and never think about Him.

For most of our people, God is marginal and a hundred good things usurp His place. To think that their marriages could be lived for His glory by teaching on the dynamics of relationships, when the glory of God is so peripheral, is like expecting the human eye to glorify the stars when we don't stare at the night sky and have never bought a telescope.

So knowing God and cherishing God and valuing the glory of God above all things, including your spouse, is the key to living marriage to the glory of God. It's true in marriage, as in every other relationship: God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.

Here is a key that unlocks a thousand doors. Superior satisfaction

in God above all earthly things, including your spouse and your health and your own life (Psalm 63:3, ESV, “your steadfast love is better than life”) is the source of great long-suffering without which husbands cannot love like Christ, and wives cannot follow like the bride of Christ, the church. Ephesians 5:22-25 makes plain that husbands take their cues of leadership and love from Christ, and wives take their cues of submission and love from the devotion of the church for whom He died. And both of those complementary acts of love—to lead, and to submit—are unsustainable for the glory of God without a superior satisfaction in all that God is for us in Christ.

Let me say it another way. There are two levels at which the glory of God may shine forth from a Christian marriage:

One is at the structural level when both spouses fulfill the roles God intended for them—the man as leader like Christ, the wife as advocate and follower of that leadership. When those roles are lived out, the glory of God’s love and wisdom in Christ is displayed to the world.

But there is another deeper, more foundational level where the glory of God must shine if these roles are to be sustained as God designed. The power and impulse to carry through the self-denial and daily, monthly, yearly dying that will be required in loving an imperfect wife and loving an imperfect husband must come from a hope-giving, soul-sustaining, superior satisfaction in God. I don’t think that our love for our wives or theirs for us will glorify God until it flows from a heart that delights in God more than marriage. Marriage will be preserved for the glory of God and shaped for the glory of God when the glory of God is more precious to us than marriage.

When we can say with the apostle Paul (in Philippians 3:8), “I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (NASB)—when we can say that about marriage—about our husband or wife—then that marriage will be lived to the glory of God.

I close by trying to say this one more way, namely, with a poem that I wrote for my son on his wedding day.

**LOVE HER MORE AND LOVE HER LESS**

*For Karsten Luke Piper  
At His Wedding to  
Rochelle Ann Orvis  
May 29, 1995*

*The God whom we have loved, and in  
Whom we have lived, and who has been  
Our Rock these twenty-two good years  
With you, now bids us, with sweet tears,  
To let you go: "A man shall leave  
His father and his mother, cleave  
Henceforth unto his wife, and be  
One unashamed flesh and free."  
This is the word of God today,  
And we are happy to obey.  
For God has given you a bride  
Who answers every prayer we've cried  
For over twenty years, our claim  
For you, before we knew her name.*

*And now you ask that I should write  
A poem—a risky thing, in light  
Of what you know: that I am more  
The preacher than the poet or  
The artist. I am honored by  
Your bravery, and I comply.  
I do not grudge these sweet confines  
Of rhyming pairs and metered lines.  
They are old friends. They like it when  
I bid them help me once again  
To gather feelings into form  
And keep them durable and warm.*

*And so we met in recent days,  
And made the flood of love and praise  
And counsel from a father's heart  
To flow within the banks of art.*

*Here is a portion of the stream,  
My son: a sermon poem. Its theme:  
A double rule of love that shocks;  
A doctrine in a paradox:*

*If you now aim your wife to bless,  
Then love her more and love her less.*

*If in the coming years, by some  
Strange providence of God, you come  
To have the riches of this age,  
And, painless, stride across the stage  
Beside your wife, be sure in health  
To love her, love her more than wealth.*

*And if your life is woven in  
A hundred friendships, and you spin  
A festal fabric out of all  
Your sweet affections, great and small,  
Be sure, no matter how it rends,  
To love her, love her more than friends.*

*And if there comes a point when you  
Are tired, and pity whispers, "Do  
Yourself a favor. Come, be free;  
Embrace the comforts here with me."  
Know this! Your wife surpasses these:  
So love her, love her more than ease.*

*And when your marriage bed is pure,  
And there is not the slightest lure  
Of lust for any but your wife,  
And all is ecstasy in life,  
A secret all of this protects:  
Go love her, love her more than sex.*

*And if your taste becomes refined,  
And you are moved by what the mind  
Of man can make, and dazzled by*



*His craft, remember that the "why"  
Of all this work is in the heart;  
So love her, love her more than art.*

*And if your own should someday be  
The craft that critics all agree  
Is worthy of a great esteem,  
And sales exceed your wildest dream,  
Beware the dangers of a name.  
And love her, love her more than fame.*

*And if, to your surprise, not mine,  
God calls you by some strange design  
To risk your life for some great cause,  
Let neither fear nor love give pause,  
And when you face the gate of death,  
Then love her, love her more than breath.*

*Yes, love her, love her, more than life;  
Oh, love the woman called your wife.  
Go love her as your earthly best.  
Beyond this venture not. But, lest  
Your love become a fool's facade,  
Be sure to love her less than God.*

*It is not wise or kind to call  
An idol by sweet names, and fall,  
As in humility, before  
A likeness of your God. Adore  
Above your best beloved on earth  
The God alone who gives her worth.  
And she will know in second place  
That your great love is also grace,  
And that your high affections now  
Are flowing freely from a vow  
Beneath these promises, first made  
To you by God. Nor will they fade  
For being rooted by the stream*

*Of Heaven's Joy, which you esteem  
And cherish more than breath and life,  
That you may give it to your wife.*

*The greatest gift you give your wife  
Is loving God above her life.  
And thus I bid you now to bless:  
Go love her more by loving less.*