

# Genesis 2.17-25

## The truth about men and women

Some years ago there was a clever romantic comedy called “The Truth about Cats and Dogs” (1996). It was the story of a young man named Brian who falls for the silky voice of a radio host, Dr Abbey Barnes who runs a program giving advice on cats and dogs (hence the movie’s title). The radio host is pretty and intelligent (she has a Phd in vet science) but is so lacking in self-esteem that she describes her appearance over the phone to Brian in terms of her slim blonde friend, Noelle (Uma Thurman). When Brian goes to the radio station to meet Abbey he runs into Noelle and thinks he’s met the radio host. But Abbey is so unconfident she doesn’t clear up the misunderstanding, but gets her friend to keep playing the role. Of course, it all leads to confusion and misunderstanding, and amusing situations.



The film is really dealing with “the truth about men and women”. In fact, don’t so many films do that ? It seems to be an unending source interest to us, but also confusion and difficulty.

So when we come to the opening chapters of the Bible it is great to know that they speak to us on the truth about men and women. It really does engage with our lives and our experience, and in fact takes us beyond male-female relationships and into the nature of humanity itself. All I want to do is help us see what Genesis 2 is saying, and let it speak to us.

## Made for Relationship

Last week we saw how “the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Genesis 2.7). We saw how that image showed the man as dependent on God. He’s just moulded dirt until God gives him life. The man doesn’t have life apart from God. He doesn’t have an existence in his own power, but only through God’s life giving power.

This next section emphasizes humanity’s dependence in another area. Look at **verse 18**:

<sup>18</sup> Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.’

What a surprising thing for God to say ! We’ve been used to reading “And God saw that it was good”. But here we discover God saying that something in his creation is *not* good ! It is *not* good that the man should be alone. The man is suffering from an absence. He needs a partner, a companion. And God determines to provide one.

Then the narrative holds us in suspense, because the man doesn’t get the companion straight away. There’s an interim, a build up ... **verses 19-20**:

<sup>19</sup> So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.

<sup>20</sup> The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.

don't think Genesis 2 is saying "God thought the animals *might* provide a partner, but things just didn't work out". It is just a way of telling the story with a build up to the real companion, but it also shows the relationship of humans and animals. The man *names* the animals, and that reflects his *authority* over them, which we need to keep in mind when we come to the serpent in chapter three ...

But for now, let's return to the narrative, with **verses 21-22**.

<sup>21</sup>So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. <sup>22</sup>And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

There's something about this description which is quite charming. The whole thing with the rib almost seems comic. When you try to imagine it, you find yourself smiling. Yet there is so much being communicated by this imagery, as we will see in a minute. But for the moment, let's move to the climax of the story in **verse 23**:

<sup>23</sup>Then the man said,  
'This at last is bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
this one shall be called Woman,  
for out of Man this one was taken.'

This is the first pop song ever written ! It is a celebration, a spontaneous outburst of poetry, marking the arrival of woman ! The man is thrilled with this partner that God has made for him. She fits the bill. She's the one. What a marvellous provision from God !

Now we have in our society the myth of "the self-made man", ("I did it my way") and sometimes people even uphold the virtue of isolation (as we see depicted in songs like "I am a rock" by Simon and Garfunkel). Can you see how the thrust of the narrative moves us away from any idea of man as independent or self-sufficient ? We are like a single chop stick – we are not meant to be alone ! The whole drive of the story is that we feel the man's need for companionship. We feel that he doesn't have all that he needs *in himself*. Rather, the fact that humanity is male and female means that there is something written into our nature that points us *beyond* ourselves. It tells us we are part of a larger whole, and so the man doesn't find himself by looking *within*, but he finds himself *in relationship* to another. It comes through in the man's delight in discovering the woman.

So Genesis 2 is showing us something vital about what it is to be human. We are not independent, self-sufficient, or self-contained individuals. We are dependent beings – dependent on God for the power of life, and dependent on each other for companionship and community. We are made for relationship. It is written into our very composition.

So what is the relationship between men and women in this description ? I think the narrative speaks first of all about what the man and woman have *in common*, and then secondly about the *distinction* between them. So let's take those one at a time.

## **Common Humanity**

This is meaning of the rib story. You see the man was made from the earth, and I suppose if the woman was made from the earth, she could have the same humanity as the man, but maybe not. After all, the animals are also formed from the earth (v 19) and the point is that they *don't* share the same nature as the man and *don't* make suitable companions. So the story

has it that the woman was made from a rib, that is, from a piece of the man, out of his human nature – so their can be no mistake – she is of the same ‘stuff’ as the man.

But there is more to it than that. The word ‘rib’ was used to express closeness. The Arabs have a saying “he is my rib”, meaning “he’s my buddy”. We might say, “my right hand man”. It is an image of closeness, trust, co-operation. In fact, the man declares that the woman is his kin. In verse 23, the phrase “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” is a way of referring to the close bond of ‘family’. I would say that Caleb is my own flesh and blood. So when the man says this of the woman, he is emphasising what he has in common with the woman. The fact that she is made out of his rib (ie. one of his bones) ties in nicely with this.

Matthew Henry, puts it well: “God did not make the woman out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved”.

The name the man gives to her uses a play on words to stress what they have in common. He says “this one shall be called woman (*ishah*), for out of man (*ish*) this one was taken” (verse 23). They have a common nature since *her* nature comes from *his* nature, just as *her* name (*ishah*) comes from *his* name (*ish*).

This common humanity is vital to how we understand how men and women relate. You may think, “what’s the problem? Of course men and women have a common humanity”. Well think for example about the popular book by John Gray entitled “Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus”. You see they are not even from the same planet ! They have different *natures*, because of their different *origins*. Mars is the god of war, while Venus is the god of love. And the point is that to have a successful relationship you have to understand this alien creature and the way they operate.

Often our society exalts the particularity of one sex over our common humanity. You see this in the worship of femininity. Women are presented as a ‘goddess’, or even as a princess, where their femininity is so exaggerated (often in terms of certain bodily proportions) that we have lost sight of their common humanity with men. Genesis 2 stands against the tendency of putting the sexes at opposite poles. Rather, they are united in their common humanity.

## Distinction

At the same time, there is another truth about men and women. *Within* this common nature there is a distinction between them. There is no sense in Genesis 2 that God cloned Adam and made another one. The male and female nature involves a real distinction between them. It is their difference that means they are made for each other.

How does God speak about this distinction ? Look again at **verse 18**:

<sup>18</sup> Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a *helper as his partner*.’

The word ‘partner’ literally means “as opposite him”. Perhaps it suggests the face-to-face relationship they are to have. It means they *correspond* to each other, that they *compliment* each other. They are like a melody and a harmony. It is the difference that makes them suited to each other. We might say, “they are a matching pair”. In that sense, ‘partner’ may be a good translation: two that take part in something together.

The word ‘helper’ fills out this picture. The man and woman are designed to work together, to cooperate with each other, to be in partnership. By the way, in describing the woman as a ‘helper’, it is not implying that she is inferior to the man. On the contrary, in the Bible God is frequently described as the helper of people – and God is certainly not inferior to us ! Rather,

the picture is of the couple as a matching pair, in a face to face partnership of cooperation. There is a good 'fit' between them.

You can then see how this relationship is expressed in marriage. Look again at **verses 24-25**.

<sup>24</sup>Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. <sup>25</sup>And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

A new family is created. There is a change in obligations: from duty to one's parents, to duty to one's wife. The word 'cling' means 'stick'. The man 'sticks' with his wife through thick and thin. There is a powerful sense of loyalty and faithfulness being expressed by this word.

This relationship that God created had a wonderful *openness* to it in the beginning. They were "both naked, and were not ashamed" (verse 25). They literally had nothing to hide. (How different from Abbey !). They had complete *freedom* to be known by the other just as they were, without anything to cover up. They were made for a fullness of relationship without any barriers. Their sexuality was not a source of anxiety, but an opportunity for open giving and responding in love. They are simply basking in the blessings of God. It is glorious ! It is almost as though chapter 2 ends the same way as chapter 1 "and indeed, it was very good".

## **Back to the Future**

How far this is from the battle of the sexes? It is a wonderful picture of harmony. We see the sheer *goodness* of what God originally created for humanity. And all of this is simply God's gift. God enjoys his people enjoying his blessings by enjoying each other. Isn't this better than anything our society can imagine? Isn't better than anything you see at the movies? Think of all the things people dream about, whether it is extraordinary romance or a fantasy of sexual fulfilment. Perhaps it is because we were made for something this good. And people search and strive and worry and trouble themselves in pursuit of these dreams. But they can never reach them. You can't get back to Eden by your own efforts.

Genesis 2 is saying, we need to make that goodness of what God created as our *starting point* in understanding the truth about men and women. There is more to say about their relationship once sin enters the picture in chapter 3, but having the right starting point is vital, because the *starting point* gives us the 'shape' of the *ending point*. It is the place *God is taking us back to* as He redeems a broken humanity through Jesus Christ. The only difference is that the future is better. But as in the beginning, so at the end, it will all be God's gift.

Finally, it is also important to see that Genesis 2 is not simply talking about marriage, nor is it implying that you have to be married to be fulfilled. It is saying that *humans are made for relationship*. It is saying we are not self-contained or self-sufficient. But the goal of God's plans for humanity is not marriage between men and women, but relationship with God and each other through Jesus Christ.

So when the NT picks up this passage, it *affirms* marriage, but moves *beyond* it. In Ephesians chapter 5, when Paul talks about marriage he does a very surprising thing. He doesn't say that Christ and the church are like a marriage, he says that marriage is like Christ and the Church. That's to say, the *ultimate* reality is Christ and his people in relationship together, the *lesser* copy of that reality is men and women in marriage. In the end, our fulfilment is found not in marriage, but in the fellowship of Christ and his people. "It is not good for the man to be alone", so God has planned for there to be a great *multitude* that no-one can count (Revelation 6.9). We will never feel alone in eternity. We will enjoy a freedom, an open-ness and a fullness of relationship that we can only imagine by seeing a prototype in Genesis 2.

*Talk by John Miller at St Bart's Café Church on July 10, 2005*