

GOD FASHIONED A WOMAN

by Steve Zeisler

C.S. Lewis coined a phrase that I have found very helpful in thinking about human history: "chronological snobbery." It's the inclination of every generation to be too impressed with itself, to think of itself as the golden age. The claim is that whatever is current is best: "We have improved on all thinking that has gone before, and what we can't improve we discard. We are the intellectual apex of human history."

Now, if there was ever a generation of champion chronological snobs, I would suggest to you that it is the baby-boomers, my own generation, which has been way too impressed with itself for years. The 1960's were the adolescent excess of the baby-boomers. My contemporaries in that era insisted that drugs, sex, and rock-and-roll were much to be preferred over dutiful responsibility. When I was a student, protesters took over universities from the faculty and administration. Marchers challenged the government. The Age of Aquarius replaced traditional religion, especially Christianity. I suppose that one of the only real positive notes is that Motown flourished during the sixties (truly a musical golden age).

Of all the problems the baby-boomers created by throwing off everything that had gone before, the most lasting is the turmoil in gender relations and family life. The knowledge of what it means to be a man or woman, of what a family ought to be like, and of what sorts of marriages should be pursued was all done away with in the name of free thought. We live with the results of that today. The world is growing more and more confused with regard to gender and family life.

We've been studying through Genesis 1-3, and we've come now to 2:18-25. We're going to stay in this section for two messages. In this one we'll consider the creation of the woman and the banishing of loneliness. In the next we'll hone in specifically on marriage. Thankfully, we have here truth that is prior and foundational to the snobbishness of every culture, every society, every generation. Here we have essential humanity described for us. Genesis 2:18-25:

The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field.

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

The man said,

**"This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;**

**she shall be called 'woman,'
for she was taken out of man."**

Note that in verse 23 the word "woman" in Hebrew is *'ishshâh* and the word "man" is *'îysh*. The man knew himself to be *'îysh*. He met the woman, realized that she exactly corresponded to him, and gave her his own

name with a feminine ending.

Is this a familiar passage for you? Even if you're not particularly aware of what else is in the Bible, you have probably read or heard this at some point. And yet there is a great deal here that ought to make us curious.

THE NEED FOR COMMUNITY

To start with, in verse 18 the statement "It is not good...." ought to strike us with some force. In the first chapter and half of the second, we heard the speech of God calling things into being—light and darkness, land from water, living things, lights to rule the day and night, and so on. As God created, his evaluation of his work at every point along the way was that it was good, and finally very good. Now for the first time God says something is not good.

Specifically, he says that it is not good that the man should be alone. Was the man really alone? Wasn't the first human person awakened with the face of God close to his, breathing life into his nostrils? Wasn't he the intimate companion of the Lord God? How should we read that he was alone when he had a depth of intimacy with God that was greater than any of us will know until eternity?

There is a profound reality about God that we should note at this point. God himself exists as a community, as a trinity of Persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. God has from eternity past and will for eternity future exist knowing himself, in a love relationship with himself. Ultimately human beings cannot know God as he is except through the experience of being in a community of love. We will know God better when we have someone else in whom to hear his voice. That's why we need to take relationships in Christ seriously, express our gifts, be for each other and connected to each other—not just to know each other, but to know him.

We read another interesting statement in verse 18: "I will make a helper suitable for [corresponding to] him." This term "helper" in Hebrew is the word *'ezer*. It has often been misunderstood and misapplied throughout Christian history. It has been taught that the woman made for the man was some kind of junior partner, apprentice, or "gofer." The glorious man, accomplishing great deeds, occasionally needed someone carry the tools, go for the lunch, make sure the coffee got made—a junior associate to help keep things running smoothly. Historically women have been given limited roles in society for this reason.

But the word *'ezer* here does not in any sense connote a junior, lesser, or subordinate person. In fact the word is most often used in the Old Testament of God as the helper of Israel. In the case of God, of course, the helper is infinitely greater than the one being helped.

The word "suitable," meaning corresponding to or matching, is also very important. God says, "I will make a partner corresponding to the man." And that's why the statement of the man in verse 23 is so important. Similar to the day of his own beginning, he once again opened his eyes to find in front of him an extraordinary being, and this time he gave her his own name: "This is *'ishshâh*—She is exactly like me. She is someone who corresponds to me as no other being could."

The Bible never argues that it is because men are physically stronger than women that they ought to have headship (we'll come back to this farther on). It doesn't say that the deeds of men are grander, or they're quicker learners. It never assumes that men have any advantage in capacity, ability, stature, and so on. The woman corresponds to the man. The man and the woman are equally mighty, equally bright, equally capable, yet different.

BEING MADE READY FOR THE GIFT OF COMMUNITY

Another curiosity before us is why verse 21 doesn't follow verse 18. God said that it was not good for the man to be alone, so he would make a companion for him. Why didn't it follow that the next thing God did was put the man to sleep and make a companion? Instead, what intervenes is three verses where animals were trotted before the man. Why this seeming non sequitur on God's part?

In Semitic languages, to name something is to understand it. You can't just compose a string of syllables to

name something. You have to study it to give it a proper name. That's why there are many times in the Bible when somebody's name is changed at a point in life when something significant about them has changed. So for Adam to have named these animals would have required study over months most likely, perhaps even years. The animals were brought to him, he examined them, he grew to understand them, and he gave them names. And over time a powerful lesson was being taught to this man: He was alone. God said it was not good for the man to be alone, and God was helping him see that it was not good. In the animal kingdom there were pairs, but there was no one for him. Everything that he studied, hoping for companionship, proved less and less fulfilling. There was nothing out there to meet the increasing need of his heart.

It's a very important experience for God to teach you what you need, to make you ready for a gift of relationship that he is going to give you. Though such preparation critical in a marriage, this isn't just about marriage. The creation of two genders would be the basis of every possible relationship. Every father, mother, aunt, brother, uncle, neighbor, and everyone else with whom we can have any kind of loving relationship all exist because God created the two sexes. You have to be made ready for a spouse, a friend, a neighbor, a sister or a brother. You have to be willing to be vulnerable in relationships. You have to be willing to receive another person with honor. For us, in our fallen state, the hard selfishness that we take with us into every new relationship has to be made soft

Adam discovered that there was nothing "out there" that would satisfy him. Similarly, our hobbies won't make us happy, our toys won't make us happy, our technology won't fulfill us, TV is not the answer to the aches in our heart, everlasting busy-ness is not a substitute for relationships. Adam was finding out that there was nothing he could discover that would meet the need of his heart for a companion. It remains true today. Human beings need community and connection, and nothing else in the created world will satisfy that.

Another curiosity here is the way in which the woman was created. Why this sleeping man, this rib surgery? There are three things that are worth our attention in this. First, it is critical that we observe the man asleep. Adam didn't participate in the creation of the woman. He didn't get to vote on what color her eyes would be. He didn't tap God on the shoulder and make suggestions as to the type of woman he should be given. How many have discovered the foolishness of trying to make over a spouse to meet some ideal God cares nothing about?

Second, we can notice that God again began with a substance-in the first case the dust of the ground, in this case the rib of the man-and fashioned it, made it into a person, and called that person to life. And again the first woman saw God before she saw anything else. God was not mediated to the woman through the man; she knew God directly, being his handiwork, in the same way the man did.

Third, there is no time reference given. We have no notion of how long it was that the woman and God knew each other before the man was awakened. This was no ordinary sleep. He had been rendered unconscious, perhaps for weeks or months. Neither men nor women should have their relationship with God mediated by anyone else. As the man did, the woman had time alone with God for him to teach her directly of his glory and love.

RESPONDING TO GOD'S GIFT

The most fulfilling relationships (marriage and all others) are God-given. Those who are propelled into relationships grasping in desperation are almost always disappointed. Men and women who have given over to God their needs for a friend, a church, a marriage, a brother, a sister, or a parent, and have let him make them ready, are the ones who are most successful in experiencing godly companionship.

The rib from which the woman was made has been a source of some poetic commentary. Why a rib, of all things? Let me call attention to what it's not rather than what it is. The rib is at the center of the body. It may be because it covers the heart or has some other representation like that. But I think it's because women weren't made to be specialists. That is, women weren't made from a hand as if they were supposed to fashion things, from a foot as if they were supposed to go for things, from a shoulder as if they were supposed to bear burdens, from an eye as if they were for seeing, or from an ear as if they were for hearing. They certainly weren't made from a reproductive organ as if having babies or the experience of sex was to be their main

purpose. They were made from the center of the body. They were to be just like the man, to be as connected to all of life as he was.

We return to the extraordinary moment when Adam was awakened in verse 23.

"The man said,

**This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;**

**she shall be called 'woman,'
for she was taken out of man."**

He was overcome, grateful, delighted, engaged. She mattered utterly to him. She was God's gift. He didn't struggle with it, he didn't have to worry about how to begin the relationship or what the social conventions were. There was a wonderful sense of grateful, responsive connection.

We can't read this without contemplating what a mess we're in today by comparison. The young folks growing up in today's world are being given less and less information on what it is to be a man or woman; less and less hope for a relationship of any kind that will last, much less a marriage; less and less confidence that they can approach intimacy with integrity. Increasingly we encounter hurt, anger, defensiveness - nothing like the grateful embrace, the song of praise and gratitude to God we read above.

MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY

It is well worth our going back and doing some thinking together about what this passage might teach us about masculinity and femininity, about why God made us this way. This material is deeper than any number of sermons can plumb, but let me make some comments for consideration.

First of all, it is very important to realize that the Bible declares from its beginning that men and women are equal and different, and this is a deliberate tension. Both sexes are equally necessary to express the image of God in humanity. But the genders are also different from each other. Maleness and femaleness are distinguishable, and it is important that their distinctions be appreciated, that we not destroy the differences that God made. And so the tension exists.

There have been cultures so taken with the differences between men and women that they destroyed gender partnership. In such settings, women are denied opportunities of education, independence, economic standing, etc. Even books like *Men are from Mars* and *Women are from Venus* talk about the chasms between men and women as if the differences are all there is to talk about. In these cases men's lives are shallow and women's are narrow, and everybody loses.

Our time and place suffers from the opposite problem. It has its roots in chronological snobbery, the insistence of the modern Silicon Valley thinker that today's political correctness surpasses the thinking of all who have gone before. Today's insistence tries to solve the tension by saying there are no differences between men and women. We are equal, meaning we are the same; nothing of importance in the way of differences exists between men and women. But the tension is God-given; we are supposed to insist on both equality and distinctiveness.

PRACTICAL OUTCOMES

So what are some practical observations to make? First of all, in Genesis there is no such thing as a woman's sphere or a man's world. Women and men are not assigned to different aspects of creation. The woman was given to the man at the very beginning, and they were to take on life together. Both were to engage in everything that they should do in making the garden beautiful, expanding it to cover the earth, having children and raising them, discovering science, writing poetry, and gazing at stars. The human enterprise needs both men and women engaged in all aspects of it. Women are not the home people and men the world-outside

people. The home needs the contribution of both men and women; children need to be raised by both father and mother. Businesses thrive when the insights of both men and women are taken seriously. The arts, athletics, public policy, and certainly the church are all places where men and women ought to take each other seriously, listen to each other, and value the distinctive contributions they each make.

Another observation is that there is a unique quality of leadership that is given to men. Ephesians 5:23 says, "The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church..." The rationale for male headship in the New Testament, based on this passage, is that God made the man first. It's not superiority of essence but antecedence that is the issue. The man's first place in creation gives him the responsibility of servant leadership, or headship.

The Bible never says that men *ought* to lead, to occupy the position as head of a home. What it does say is that "the husband *is* the head of the wife," like it or not. The important question for men is whether they will lead well or badly, whether they will fail in their leadership or succeed, do good or harm, back away from responsibility or take it up. Angry, hurtful tyranny is evil. Childish, "me-first" leadership is contemptible, and embarrassing. The confused, withdrawn version of leadership that we're familiar with in so many contemporary men-wringing their hands, not knowing how to proceed, being fearful-is sub-Christian. Purposeful servant leadership was the responsibility given to Adam and to every husband since.

Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers were extraordinary dancers. Of course Fred Astaire would always lead as they danced together. Someone once commented on what a great dancer Fred Astaire was. I heard a woman say as a rejoinder, "Yes, but Ginger Rogers did everything he did, only she did it in high heels and backwards." Hers was a lot tougher assignment! Their dance together was beautiful.

Why, finally, did the creation of gender happen as it did? What priorities might have been in God's mind? I think his single greatest priority, not surprisingly, is love. He created the sexes and gave them to each other the way he did because he intends for us to experience love. We are connected to someone to whom we are equal, who is different and mysterious, to whom we ourselves are mysterious. We have to learn vulnerability, acceptance, reliance on someone whose strengths are different from our own. Love for each other and trust in God are the wonderful result.

The emphasis of the Bible is that God created the sexes so we could learn to take risks and experience the wonder, courage, and glory that go with having people with whom we are in community, with whom we can be in love.

In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul wrote that three great, eternal qualities last forever: faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love.

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Fifth Message
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