In considering the biblical ideal of marriage it is important to define the word “ideal.” The term may be used in at least two distinguishable senses. On the one hand, it may denote that which exists only in idea but has no existence in reality. In this sense it indicates not only the unreal but also the unrealizable, as when we say of someone’s plans or proposals, “They seem rather idealistic.” On the other hand, the word may denote an existing thing as the type or standard for imitation, as when we say, “Let that be your ideal.” The assumption in this case is that the ideal, far from being unattainable, is perfectly capable of realization.

Here we are concerned to set forth the biblical picture or image of marriage. As we proceed, we shall note that it is presented, not as something attainable only by an exalted few, but rather as the pattern to be followed by all. The real expectation is to achieve it, even though it takes effort and cost and, above all, the assistance of divine grace.

The Ideal of Marriage in the Old Testament

We may begin by reviewing the ideal of marriage in the Old Testament.

1. The Creation Ideal (Gen. 2:18-24)

The verses indicated clearly stand together as a unit. Verse 18 expresses God’s concern to find a “helper suitable” for the man, and verse 20 notes the failure of the first attempt: “But for Adam no suitable helper was found.” A second attempt is then made, which is successful (v. 23); and a comment is made indicating that the success achieved is the reason people marry (v. 24).

The passage may be said to consist of two pieces of narrative (vv. 19-20 and 21-23) describing the attempts to provide Adam with a “suitable helper,” the narratives being encased in two sayings (vv. 18, 24). We shall consider these four components in order.
First, the opening states the problem: “It is not good for the man to be alone” (v. 18a). This is of fundamental importance in defining the problem to which marriage is presented as the solution, namely, the problem of the man’s aloneness. But aloneness in what sense? William A. Heth replies, “Man’s aloneness in Genesis 2:18 is not his ‘loneliness’ but his ‘helplessness,’ his inability, apart from the woman, to carry out God’s creation directives to perpetuate and multiply the race and to cultivate and govern the earth (Gen. 1:26-28).” This is sound as far as it goes, even though it may not bring the point into full focus. This takes place in verse 18b: “I will make a helper suitable for him.” This rendering does not do full justice to the original Hebrew. Thus, the word translated “helper” (‘ezer), whose meaning can vary according to context, may carry the sense of “strength” (e.g., Deut. 33:26, 29). Similarly, “suitable” may not be the most apt rendering of the Hebrew kaneqdo (which occurs only here in the Bible). It is used more frequently in later Hebrew and carries the meaning “equal.”

Accordingly, R. David Freedman concludes: “I believe the customary translation of these words, despite its near universal adoption, is wrong. That is not what the words are intended to convey. They should be translated to mean approximately ‘a power equal to man.’ That is, when God concluded that He would create another creature so that man would not be alone, He decided to make ‘a power equal to him,’ someone whose strength was equal to man’s. Woman was not intended to be merely man’s helper. She was to be instead his partner.”

The heart of the biblical ideal of marriage is partnership. To appeal to the creation mandate of Gen. 1:26-28 to exclude the idea of companionship from the creation understanding of marriage is as misguided as to interpret companionship from a wholly 20th-century perspective. Claus Westermann says judiciously: “The majority of interpreters . . . have stressed correctly that the meaning is not just

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2. R. David Freedman, “Woman, a Power Equal to Man,” Biblical Archaeology Review (Jan.-Feb. 1983): 56. Freedman goes on to affirm that this rendering is justified not only philologically but also by the contexts, distant and remote of the position of woman in the Old Testament (58). Walter C. Kaiser comments on Freedman’s rendering, “This translation may now be the preferred one,” Towards Old Testament Ethics, in Academie Books (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 154 n. 6, cf. also 182 n. 1.
help at work . . . nor is it concerned merely with the begetting of descendants; . . . it means support in a broad sense. . . . The man is created by God in such a way that he needs the help of a partner; hence mutual help is an essential part of human existence.”

Adam, then, is lacking in regard to partnership, and the Lord God sees such a situation as “not good.” This leads to the second part of the unit, namely the first attempt to provide Adam with partnership (Gen. 2:19-20). The search begins, appropriately enough, with other existing creatures—animals and birds—whom God created from the ground as He did the man himself (vv. 7, 19). As sharing a common origin, they might be likely to provide man with partnership. God therefore brings them to the man for naming. In the thought of the ancient world, including the Old Testament, a name was not merely a label as it is today but a description of character. To know the name was to know the nature. Adam was not merely labeling his fellow creatures but getting to know what they were like and, in particular, whether they could provide the partnership he lacked. The result of the exercise was frustration. “For Adam no suitable helper was found” (v. 20).

The third component in the unit is verses 21-23, in which the narrative of the creation of the woman is recorded. Man’s plight will be resolved only by a special act of creation in which the man’s partner is fashioned out of the man himself. Almost all translations read that God took one of the man’s ribs for the purpose, closing up the place with flesh. But the Hebrew word tselä’ in all of its other occurrences in the Hebrew Bible is rendered “side,” and no good reason has been shown for not retaining that rendering here. If this means that the part of man from which woman was made is therefore unspecified, it more importantly indicates figuratively the nature of the relationship man lacked, namely, one to stand alongside him. Wenham comments, “Here the ideal of marriage as it was understood in ancient Israel is being portrayed, a relationship characterized by harmony and intimacy between partners.”

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3. Claus Westermann, Genesis 1—11: A Commentary, English translation John Scul- lion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 227. Cf. S. R. Driver, “It is not enough to place man in the garden: further provision is yet required for the proper development of his nature, and satisfaction of its needs: a help, who may in various ways assist him, and who may at the same time prove a companion, able to interchange thought with him, and be in other respects his intellectual equal, is still needed” (The Book of Genesis, in Westminster Commentaries, 8th ed. [London: Methuen, 1911], 41).