

In 1981, 750 million persons around the world tuned in to watch a part-time preschool assistant named Diana Spencer get married in a ceremony that would cost over \$110 million today. In a classic Cinderella story, Diana was rescued out of poverty and anonymity by Charles, the Prince of Wales. Her Prince Charming literally made her into a princess. And hundreds of millions of persons around the world tuned in to watch. Because we all love a good fairy tale.

Princess Diana's story was everything we want in a love story. Hers was the classic rags-to-riches Romance. It's the basic story we see in books and movies over and over and over. Everyone knows there's going to be a charming, brave, flawless hero who rescues a beautiful, chaste damsel in distress and they're going to end up together.

It's Han Solo rescuing Princess Leia from the Empire in *Star Wars*. It's Richard Gere rescuing Julia Robertson from prostitution in *Pretty Woman*. It's Leonardo DiCaprio rescuing Kate Winslet from her boorish, cruel fiancé in *Titanic*. It's Edward rescuing Bella from... being sad I guess... in *Twilight*. It's Batman rescuing Catwoman from her criminal past in *The Dark Knight Rises* (see? Equal opportunity offense!).

You can think of plenty more examples, and we haven't even dipped into music yet. And these stories that we love, these stories we tell each other, these stories we consume to the tune of billions of dollars a year, are the stories that end like all good fairy tales do:

"And they both lived Happily Ever After."

The Fairy Tale ending to this fairy-tale Romance is played out in the Wedding Day. This Romance Story is all about that big finish, the Wedding Day. Just since 1990, the average cost of a wedding in the USA has increased from \$15,000 to over \$27,000 (and that's in a recession, remember!) We'll never match Princess Di's hundred-million-dollar affair, but that doesn't stop us from trying. After all, we're celebrating True Love. The Wedding Day is the climax of the story. It's the "Happily Ever After" moment, the culmination of the story-book romance that's swept this particular Prince Charming and his Cinderella together.

Did you ever stop to notice that the Romance Script, this fairy tale our culture trains us to live, always leads up to the wedding day? We never find out what happens to Cinderella and her Prince Charming *after* the wedding. All we have is "Happily Ever After".

No one wants to remember how Princess Diana's story ended. Her *After* "Happily Ever After" was anything but. An ugly, painful divorce and then death with her paramour. We'd rather just remember the story *before*, without the tragedy.

We don't think much about anyone's After Happily Ever After. We spend all our time planning our weddings and little preparing for our marriage. We teach ourselves and our children that as long as you do all the hard work Before to find your One True Love, the marriage will take care of itself (because you're perfect for each other, after all). The heart of marriage, we think, is romance. That - if you're really meant to be, then to quote the Beatles, All You Need is Love, baby!

There's a big problem with this Romance Marriage, however. It's not even a little bit true. We've seen enough After stories to know that Romantic love by itself isn't enough to sustain a marriage over the course of a lifetime. That's why *Titanic* is such a perfect love story – Leo dies before they

have a chance to spend a marriage together. Their love can remain pure, untroubled by the realities of marriage forever.

The most Romantic fairy-tale, rags-to-riches stories and the best weddings money can buy don't ensure a happy marriage. Our world looks much more like "The Break Up" than "Happily Ever After". For every marriage we know that has lasted, for every disgustingly cute old couple still walking hand-in-hand, we have many more people who didn't get a fairy tale ending. Who either haven't found Mr. or Miss Right or have given up on marriage altogether. We know marriages that from the outside look fine, but on the inside are loveless, where the spouses have become platonic roommates who both pitch in on chores and paying bills, but they Lost that Lovin Feeling a long time ago and they're just sort of getting by. That's not "most" marriages though, because most marriages today end in divorce for one reason or another. And once a marriage has failed, it's harder to make that commitment a second time, and easier that second or third or fourth time to throw in the towel.

With all the problems around marriage, it's no surprise that some are proclaiming the end of marriage, that humans just weren't designed for monogamy. We're witnessing the rise of the Starter Marriage – just practice for a few years, get one under your belt and then find your soulmate. Plenty of others are just skipping marriage, choosing to cohabitate, to love the one you're with. And even among the older generations, longer life-spans, pensions and retirement are introducing plenty of new, never-before-seen scenarios to the marriage landscape.

It seems that no one knows what do with marriage.

The good news is that Marriage isn't actually in trouble. What we're actually losing isn't the institution of marriage, but the Romance Foundation we've been building marriage on for the last couple hundred years or so. The "Happily Ever After" fairy tale romance marriage is crumbling around us, mostly because we expect too much out of Romance. If we want better marriages, we need a stronger foundation, one that's enough to support what comes *After* Happily Ever After.

The Romance foundation wasn't ever strong enough to support the weighty, awesome thing that is marriage. We need to recover the proper, biblical foundation of marriage. Because if we can build our marriages as God calls us to, we'll actually discover something much better than the Fairy Tale marriages we've all been taught to want.

Many people who want to "fix" marriage tell us we should return to how marriage used to be. And while it's true that marriage used to look very different, returning to traditional forms of marriage isn't going to fix anything.

The idea that we should marry for love is actually a relatively recent social idea (only maybe a couple hundred years old). For most of human history, marriage was arranged. One family sold their daughter to another family because it was mutually beneficial to both families. Marriage was really about social stability, not love. In the pre-modern world, romance was still prized and celebrated, but it was understood that Love came *later* in a marriage, if at all. It was a rare, beautiful treasure. If you could *build* it, it was awesome. But it certainly wasn't what you *started* with. Traditional, ancient marriage was founded not on Romance, but on a stable family and culture.

Of course today we find that disgusting – we know that women aren't property and besides, we want Romance in our marriages! We want to choose our loves, not have them assigned to us.

But the reality is that our Romance Script hasn't fared any better than the stability script (worse in some ways). Should we *want* to return to a world where marriage is about the community not the individual? Where personal happiness is sacrificed for the good of the family? Would that be better, even if it railed against our modern sensibilities?

Actually, neither of these is the Biblical picture of healthy personhood or healthy marriage.

The first place we find marriage in the Scriptures is at the close of the first creation story. Before we introduced sin into the world, when everything was still perfect, Marriage is presented as the pinnacle of creation. In the Genesis 1 creation story, marriage is the final set piece in God's establishing of the world. It's like God's finishing touch on the masterpiece that is the world. God originally designed marriage to be the capstone of the perfect creation. Marriage was founded on God's work and God's intentions. So if we're going to talk about marriage, we need to talk about what God intended marriage for.

This is where people who idolize so-called traditional marriage need to be very careful. The old models of marriage we see in the ancient world and even later in the Scriptures are as infected by sin and death as our contemporary ideas are. The whole traditional, family-oriented script assumed that women are essentially property. Daughters were sold (for a dowry) to another family. The institution of marriage in the wake of the Fall was oppressive, and marriage has often been an exceptionally oppressive institution, especially for women. So despite the fact that some people idealize that past, we know that we can't go back to that. That traditional Stability Script of marriage was as broken as our current Romance Script is.

So where does that leave us? We know we can't stay where we are, and we don't want to go back to the mythical good old days. So what do we do with Marriage?

We are a Church. Our life and our hope are grounded in the resurrection of Jesus. So we begin with a confession: When Jesus came to heal us, he announced the Good News that God is taking back creation, that God has begun the business of setting right what we put wrong.

The Gospel isn't just good news for individuals. It's for the whole world!

So if the Gospel is about restoring the original creative intent of the world, and if marriage was part of that original creation, then that means the Gospel announcement Jesus made is about Marriage, too. When we talk about Marriage, if we begin with Jesus' death and resurrection, we find hope and healing. We find a better foundation, a stronger ground not just for our individual spiritual lives, but for marriage too!

We don't think about marriage as a Gospel-thing. Even saying it out loud, that marriage should be grounded and founded in Jesus' death and resurrection is a confusing statement. What would that even mean?

It's confusing because of how enmeshed we are in the idea that marriage is mainly about Romance. Why should people get married?

Not to create a stable society. And not because they're in love. Those are good things. But they're not good foundations. They're too weak to support marriage.

What if we get married because of the Gospel? What if the Gospel, not Romance, not Stability, but the Good News that through Jesus' incarnation, death and resurrection, God is restoring all things, what if that Gospel is the foundation for Marriage?

(Okay, maybe. But what does that mean?)

The writer of Ephesians wrote about marriage as a picture of Jesus and the Church. Of God and God's people. Of the rescuer and the rescued. In chapter 5, the author describes how Marriage is a picture of our relationship with Jesus. He starts by quoting Genesis, that original picture of God's intentions for marriage:

As the Scriptures say, "A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one." This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one. So again I say, each man must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband." -- Ephesians 5:31-33 (NLT)

We'll dive into more details of Ephesians 5 later in this series, but for now, look at what's happening in Ephesians 5: Even though we messed up God's original plans for marriage (and all of creation), through Jesus God is restoring all things, including marriage. So marriage is an illustration. It's a picture, a demonstration, of how God loves us and rescues us.

Jesus' own saving work, his death and resurrection, his call to us to become like him, to join in what he's doing, are the ground for marriage. When we choose to marry, we *ought* to be choosing to participate in what God is doing in the world. We *ought* to be asking how marriage helps me and my spouse (or spouse-to-be) become more like Jesus.

If you're single and thinking about getting married, you don't ask the question

"Does this make my family/community/life more stable?"

Don't ask, "Do I really love this person? Do they meet my needs?" (We'll be talking more over the next few weeks about why those are the wrong questions to be asking.)

But, "Does this person help me look more like Jesus? Am I more fully able to participate in God's kingdom with this person than without them?"

If so, then consider Marriage. If not, it's time for a *serious* reexamination of your relationship. Because you are building on a foundation that can't sustain you.

And what if you're already married? Mostly we don't ask how our marriages help us to participate in God's kingdom. We ask, Is this marriage meeting my needs? Do I feel fulfilled? (We'll be talking more over the next few weeks about why those are the wrong questions to be asking.)

If we want healthy, stable, God-honoring, romance-filled marriages, we must reframe how we understand marriage. What the purpose is. What we're doing when we live married life.

Not stability. Not romance. These things are good. But in every relationship they come and go. They're too fickle to be the foundation of a marriage that endures.

If you go with the building metaphor, stability and romance are more like wall studs. They're important. You wouldn't want a marriage without them. But they're not the *foundation*. If you tried to build a foundation out of the wood we use for framing walls, the house would fall apart quickly.

So too when we try to build a marriage on romance. Apologies to the fab four, but you need more than love. You need the transformational gospel of Jesus. You need the good news that even though you married a sinner (and so did your spouse), both of you have been rescued and redeemed by Jesus' death and resurrection and now you have the opportunity to join in what God is doing now in the world.

God originally designed marriage to help us participate fully in God's kingdom. And even though we messed it all up, through Jesus' death and resurrection, God uses marriage to call us back to our original purpose.

In other words, the point of marriage is to make both you and your spouse more like Jesus.

[Humin interview?]

That is a firm foundation, one that can endure the trials and tribulations that come in every life, in every relationship, in every marriage. The foundation of Jesus' Gospel is strong enough to endure through better and worse, through richer and poorer, until death do you part.

But it doesn't come from Romance. You can't spend all your energies on what happens *before* your wedding. You can't plan the wedding of your dreams at the expense of building a marriage.

If you spend all your time on the Romance, expecting "Happily Ever After" to take care of itself, you're in for a world of disappointment. The good news is it's never too late to focus on God. Never too late to make the Gospel the center of your world.

If you're single – whether you've never been married or if you're living in the wake of a fairy tale that didn't end so happily, it's time to stop chasing "Happily Ever After". Instead of chasing Prince Charming or Miss Right, pursue God. If your goal is romance, you're setting yourself up for one failed relationship after another. You won't find fulfillment; you're going to collect scars and wounds. You'll keep crashing and burning and wondering why you can't find your One, that special person who was made just for you. (Hint: It's because no such person exists. That's a fairy tale.) You'll experience Break Up after Break Up and you'll get mad because the story isn't supposed to end like that.

Instead, you should be seeking out relationships that point you toward Jesus. Partnering with people who help you look more like Jesus (and hopefully vice versa). If you do that, and romance

follows, well you may just decide that you might want to spend the rest of your life with that person.

If that's how you choose to live your life, you'll be the kind of person who if you choose to marry, will win, will make it to the end, that's better today than it was yesterday, because you built on a solid Gospel foundation.

And if you're married, but your After doesn't look like the Happily Ever After you pictured on your wedding day, you too need to refocus. Marriage isn't *about* meeting your needs, making you happy and fulfilled. Marriage is about joining with God to heal the world, about becoming more like Jesus. (We're going to spend a *lot* more time on this in the coming weeks, but for now, spend some time carefully examining what you've built your marriage on. What's the foundation? Is it romance? Are you still expecting a fairy tale of some kind? Or are you truly making God the core, the foundation, the ground of your relationship?) Maybe it's time to focus on building a marriage, not just a fairy tale.

There's no doubt we have a sort of marriage crisis in our culture. But the problem isn't that marriage is old-fashioned or idealistic. It's that we've tried to build on too shaky a foundation. We've idolized Romance, expected it to do what it just isn't capable of.

We live in the middle of a culture that promises us Happily Ever After if we find that special someone who completes us. But we've all seen that script fail in real life. Over and over and over. We know that Romance can't deliver on the promises it makes.

Because Romance is all about the Before, all about the chase. But the Gospel is what happens next. It's about what happens After Happily Ever After. Romance only cares about the Wedding Day, but the Gospel is concerned with the Last Day, the Day we are finally conformed fully to the image of Jesus.

So let's not become disillusioned. Let's not give up on marriage. Instead, let's reorient ourselves. Let's reclaim the Good News that Jesus' death and resurrection have made all things new and that includes marriage.

Marriage is a very good thing. It's a beautiful part of God's good creation, and as people God has rescued and called to be a part of rescuing that creation, marriage is something God *wants* us to get right. That means that the Holy Spirit is at work among all of us, single, married, post-married to make us whole.

Prayer

Examine

1. How much have I bought into the Romance Script? How much does it shape my expectations of the relationship(s) I'm in?
2. What do I expect out of marriage?
3. How fully am I participating in God's Kingdom right now?
4. Whatever my marital status, how can I participate more fully in God's kingdom this week?