

What Does Genesis 2:24 Mean for Newlyweds?

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This article examines Genesis 2:24 with a view to what it means to newlyweds today. It investigates each clause so one can appreciate the verse and apply it to their lives and marriage.

For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.

Genesis 2:24 (NASB95)¹

Considering the culture

We must examine the verse within the context of Biblical culture. It is important to look at several things to interpret this verse correctly. First, one must consider the period of the writing of the verse because the time of its writing determines the lifestyle of the people and the situation the verse applies to.

During the Patriarchal Period people generally lived in tents as nomads. Living as a clan was vital to survival during this time for several reasons. They needed enough people in the group to defend themselves from raiding parties. They also had to work together as their own community. They needed to have people with the required variety of skills since they made most of their belongings.

Some scholars place this verse during the First Temple Period when the Israelites lived settled agrarian lives near villages and cities. They lived in houses instead of the tents of nomads during this time. Their defense during this period would fall to the city rather than the clan or family. A settled life allowed families to focus on some skills while depending on the local community of people who possessed other skills available for purchase or trade of labor and wares. Living in a city or village allowed people to live in smaller family units than the Patriarchal Period.

The period of the writing of this verse relates to whether it was possible for a couple to leave their parents and establish an independent household for themselves when they married. Living in a small family group during the Patriarchal Period proves dangerous and difficult. Therefore, Sons could not “leave” their parents safely nor economically.

People who settled near a village or city did not face the obstacles of the nomadic people. Patriarchal Period of living in a small family group provided they possessed the resources to trade labor or wares. Yet even in the cities of the New Testament, men generally were not able to establish their own household until after receiving their inheritance.

This article assumes the earlier date of the nomadic Patriarchs for this verse because the words come from Adam’s mouth.

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The patriarchal family structure

Secondly, one must recognize and understand the patriarchal family structure. There would be a patriarchal “father” in charge of the clan. This would likely be the son’s father. A man generally stayed within his clan his until he received his inheritance.

There are rare cases when people left their clan. Abraham left his clan at God’s direction to “leave your father’s house” and travel to the promised land. It appears security was not an issue because he had 318 trained fighting men with him when he rescued Lot.

The Book of Ruth provides an example of a man called Elimelech leaving behind a famine in Israel to live in Moab. It is unknown if he left a clan behind or how many people accompanied him on his journey. We do know he and his sons died in Moab. He had close relatives in Israel but there is no mention of a living father or brother when Ruth returned to Israel. One should also note this was after the patriarchal times and may not have application to this study.

Fathers were honored and feared. They embodied authority and control over their families during Biblical times. They managed the family’s resources and protected the family’s honor. Father’s made the decisions in the family and played a decisive role in choosing spouses for their children.

Sons did not have the means to support a household unless the father provided them with the resources to support themselves. This lack of resources usually followed sons through life until the death of their father left them with an inheritance. The inheritance was a distribution of the family’s wealth among the sons of the family. Sons often were finally able to establish a household for themselves once they received their inheritance.

Genesis 25:5–6 tells us that Abraham gave gifts to the sons of his concubines while he was living but he gave all that he had to Isaac. Isaac probably received his portion as his inheritance upon Abraham’s death. Isaac married Rebekah when he was 40 years old and remained with Abraham’s clan and under Abraham’s authority after he married. Jacob did not marry until after his father’s death.

Looking at their culture tells us that sons generally did not have the resources to establish a household of their own and therefore usually did not marry until later in life after receiving an inheritance which was usually after their father died and left the mother widowed. It would be the responsibility of a son to care for their widowed mother who was usually considerably younger than their husbands. So, one can confidently say they did not abandon their parents when they married.

What does it mean to “leave his father and his mother”?

There are Hebrew words for father and for mother, but none that include both parents so the phrase “his father and his mother” means “his parents” which may also imply “his family of origin.”

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The definition of the word “Leave” (עזב) is to leave or abandon. It is used of armies that fled away from battle, of people having left (abandoned) the land, of land left uncultivated, or an abandoned town.² It is a strong word that indicates significant if not total separation.

Such an abandoning separation from one’s parents and family of origin is unconscionable as it would likely leave their mother and younger siblings without the resources and means to survive if the father is deceased. It is also quite likely that the son would not have the means to establish an independent household during the Patriarchal Period without having received an inheritance.

Knowing what is known about the culture and seeing it appears at odds with Genesis 2:24, forces us to ask ourselves what we are missing or not understanding. So, why does Genesis 2:24 use such a strong word to say “leave” when it is not possible? The part we are missing is that there is a figure of speech in this verse. This figure of speech called hyperbole, or exaggeration, occurs frequently in scripture. It appears more frequently in poetry than other genres, but this is not poetry here. Figures of speech affect the meaning of the words involved. This makes it important to recognize them when we study the Bible. One must also understand the effect each specific figure of speech produces.

The author uses hyperbole to give the verse an intensity to emphasize the message, but the author does not expect the reader to take it at face value. The author expects the reader to recognize the figure of speech as such and know the meaning of the figure of speech and the effect it has on the text, which is to emphasize it. “This [leave] does not mean that he is to forsake and no longer to love or care for his parents.”³ To “leave his father and his mother” indicates some degree of separation from his parents, though not to the extreme it first seemed. We must look further to understand what the author intends for us to understand by “leave.”

“Be joined to his wife”

Joined (דָּבַק) has a figurative sense in a number of verses as it does here. Join is an antonym of the earlier “leave”⁴ just discussed. Theological lexicon of the Old Testament⁵ says of joined (דָּבַק)

All meanings cluster tightly around the basic meaning “to be close by”; ... Of persons, the qal means “to hang on, hold fast to, hold on to (willingly)”

² Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., Richardson, M. E. J., & Stamm, J. J. (1994–2000). The Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament (electronic ed., p. 806). Leiden: E.J. Brill.

³ Bullinger, E. W. (1898). Figures of speech used in the Bible (p. 423). London; New York: Eyre & Spottiswoode; E. & J. B. Young & Co.

⁴ Jenni, E., & Westermann, C. (1997). Theological lexicon of the Old Testament (p. 324). Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers.

⁵ Ibid.

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From the quote above, we have in Genesis 2:24 where “joined” (קָדַח) is of the Qal stem and when relating to persons, it means to willingly hold on to the person. Genesis 2:24 uses it positively of “a man cleaving to his wife.”⁶ It is used with “to love” to enhance the expression of the passionate love of Shechem for Dinah.⁷ (Genesis 34:3) Ruth “clung” to her mother-in-law. (Ruth 1:14) The word is also used of the righteous man’s relationship with God.⁸ (Deuteronomy 10:20) It is used of relationships in general and does not refer to a sexual relationship.⁹

It is convenient for us that the Hebrew words “leave” (עָזַב) and “join” (קָדַח) are antonyms. If one can understand “joined” in this verse as the bond of close relational love and longing-for between husband and wife, one can view “leave,” within the figure of speech, as the weakening of those same bonds between the man and his family of origin in such a way as to allow the “joining” of the couple to occur. This meaning carries an emphasis because of the hyperbole.

They shall become one flesh.

Here the common figure of speech called “synecdoche of the part” comes into play. It is where a part represents the whole. Here a part of the body represents the whole body. The part of the body mentioned “flesh” is an actual part of the whole “body” represented.¹⁰ The author’s intended meaning is that the man and wife become one body and functions much like a single entity.

If we think of a person’s body, it has a unity within itself and seldom argues with itself. Neither does one part of the body normally harm another part of itself on purpose. Rather, the body nurtures and cares for itself. This is a wonderful example of what a marriage should be.

Recall the beginning of verse 24 “for this reason ...” which takes us back to the preceding verses.

²¹ 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 the flesh at that place. ²² The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. ²³ The man said, “This is now bone of my bones, And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man.”

Genesis 2:21–23 (NASB95)

⁶ Wallis, G. (1978). קָדַח. G. J. Botterweck & H. Ringgren (Eds.), J. T. Willis & G. W. Bromiley (Trans.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Revised Edition, Vol. 3, p. 81). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., Richardson, M. E. J., & Stamm, J. J. (1994–2000). *The Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament* (electronic ed., p. 209). Leiden: E.J. Brill.

⁹ Wallis, G. (1978). קָדַח.

¹⁰ Bullinger, E. W. (1898). *Figures of speech used in the Bible* (p. 642). London; New York: Eyre & Spottiswoode; E. & J. B. Young & Co.

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In Genesis 2:21-23 one body becomes 2 people as God forms Eve from Adam's rib. The reverse process occurs in verse 24 where 2 people become "one body" or "one flesh."

Becoming one flesh is neither instantaneous nor an event. The becoming "one flesh" or "one body" is a process by which two people work out among themselves their priorities in life, their ways of thinking together and communicating with each other.

Many marriages through history have begun with an agreement that two people would marry. Often the two who married were nearly strangers to one another. The assumption was that love would come. Love often came, though for various reasons it did not always develop.

Sometimes the reason might be interference of parents and in-laws who wedges themselves between the couple. It is only necessary to instruct the son to distance himself from his parent to the point that his wife becomes his priority to avoid this issue since the wife likely had already separated from her family considerably to be with her husband.

Other times it is the lack of them "Joining" together. That is having the attraction, longing for each other, and desire to keep each other close by. Here the instruction to keep each other "close by" guides the couple to a caring for one another in a way that leads them to God's goal for each marriage in that they become one. It is not God's plan for a married couple to remain distant to each other. Deuteronomy 24:5 allows the husband to stay near home for one year after he marries to allow them to develop this joined closeness. Neither person must let their own priorities overshadow their priorities as a couple. Nor should one simply give up their priorities for the other, but they should work such things out between them.

One body became two people and two people become one body.

Because God took a bone out of Adam and formed Eve from Adam's body, the one body (Adam's body), became two people (Adam and Eve). Then they clung to each other and soon functioned as one. This second process that occurs in marriage is, in a sense, the reverse process of verse 23 where one body became two people, because in verse 24 two people become one body.

This concept is kindred to all Christians forming the body of Christ where we have many people becoming one body in Christ. The New testament has much to say about the "body of Christ" getting along and maintaining harmony among its members. These things apply to maintaining harmony in marriage also.

The takeaway for newlyweds.

Adam recognized the need to depend on one's family of origin less once one marries and for the couple to focus on one another. Adam emphasizes what he said by the extreme way he says it. He does not intend for one to abandon their family. What he means for the couple to do is to loosen the ties to one's family of origin so they can tighten the ties to their spouse.

A newlywed couple must focus on each other and care for their spouse as though he or she were themselves. They are to become increasingly close to one another physically and

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emotionally, desiring to be near each other. As they do so, they also become more distant to their families of origin. They must recognize obstacles to the success of their marriage and deal with them when they interfere. Their priority is their marriage and to establish themselves as a couple that can work through life's problems and set priorities.

Genesis 2:21-24 gives us a beautiful picture of one person becoming two people, a husband and a wife. Now then, two people who marry become "one body" or "one flesh." Becoming more Christlike as taught in the New Testament will help newlyweds to become the best spouses ever, which leads to a happy marriage and a full and godly life.