

The Bride That Jesus Marries

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[0:00] Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting, Hallelujah, for our Lord God Almighty reigns.

! Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory. For the wedding of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.

Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God's holy people. Then the angel said to me, Write this, Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb.

And he added, These are the true words of God. And then our second reading is in Revelation chapter 21, verse 1 to 4.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.

[1:02] I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Look, God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them.

They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

Thank you.

Thank you.

By your Holy Spirit, open our hearts and minds to hear what you want to say to us tonight. Would you speak words of truth and words of grace into our lives?

[2:53] Would you soften any hardness in our hearts? Would you tear down the barriers we put up against you? Lord, remind us again of your deep and steadfast love for us.

Awaken in us a fresh love and longing for you. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, a few months back in September, Alice and I were celebrating our 10-year wedding anniversary.

And in the weeks leading up to it, I realized something slightly embarrassing. I'd never actually got around to making a wedding album.

Just never got around to it. We didn't have a professional photographer, just family and friends of cameras. Great photos, hundreds, probably thousands of them.

But there they were gathering dust on an old hard drive. So for our 10-year anniversary, I finally sat down and went through them. Sat down and started to make an album, flipping back through the moments that told the story of our day.

[4:04] And it struck me. In the Bible, God gives us something like a wedding album. I wonder if you've noticed at either end of the Bible, at the beginning and at the end, there's a wedding.

The Bible opens with the wedding of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. And it ends with the marriage supper of the Lamb in the book of Revelation.

So at both horizons of the story, marriage frames it all. So tonight, we're going to flip through some of the snapshots, the key pictures that show us where history is heading and what the whole story has been moving towards.

This evening, we're looking at the wedding to end all weddings. So first snapshot, the bride. Now, near the end of the Bible, John is given an extraordinary glimpse of the future.

A vision of the day when God remakes the world. Not patched up or repaired, but made perfectly new. And one of the most striking things is how God describes the church, what John calls the New Jerusalem.

[5 : 21] So read with me again in Revelation 21, verses 1-2, page 1249. Revelation 21.

And then John adds something else.

And for some of us here tonight, that line about tears might be the one you need to hear most.

But anyway, the church, God's people is here pictured as a bride, a beautiful bride. Whose bride? Well, John already knows.

So in Revelation 19, verses 7-8, just across the page there, we hear the wedding of the Lamb has come.

[6 : 38] And his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear. The bride belongs to the Lamb, to Jesus himself.

Which means that when Jesus returns, it won't just be a rescue operation. It won't just be a judgment scene. It will be a wedding day.

A wedding beyond your wildest imagination. And if you're a Christian, if you belong to Christ, you're invited, not as a guest, but as the bride.

You're the bride. No wedding crashing is required. No sneaking in through the back door. You'll be walking up the aisle. Now I know for some of us, that sounds a little bit strange, especially if you're a red-blooded bloke.

Hard to imagine yourself in those stilettos. But that's because we usually think marriage works this way around.

[7 : 49] First, human marriage. Then, maybe, something spiritual like Christ and the church. The Bible says it's the other way around.

So in Ephesians 5, Ephesians 5.31, Paul quotes the very first marriage in Genesis.

Ephesians 5.31, For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. And then he says something astonishing.

This is a profound mystery. But I'm talking about Christ and the church. Human marriage was never the ultimate thing.

It was always the picture pointing beyond itself to Christ and his bride. So if you want to know how committed Jesus is to the church, here's your answer.

[8 : 50] He doesn't just build it. He doesn't just rule over it as its head. He marries it. He binds himself to us in covenant love. He's our perfect husband to be.

That's how much he cares about the church, about the local church, about St. Silas, about you. That's how committed he is to you forever.

And yet, when we hear that the church is a beautiful bride, some of us hesitate. Us.

Beautiful. See, we know our sins only too well. As the Bible says, our sins are ever before us. We fall short more often than we care to admit.

So how can Christ, the perfect bridegroom, look at what someone once called the church of the dropouts, the losers, the sinners, the failures, and call her beautiful?

[9 : 55] What does it mean to be called beautiful when you don't feel it? Well, that question brings me to the story of one particular wedding day.

I've mentioned Joni Erickson now before. She was paralyzed in a diving accident aged 17 and left paralyzed from the shoulders down.

On her wedding day, she felt awkward. She was feeling self-conscious. Getting ready was a struggle. Her girlfriends wrestled to get her paralyzed body into her wedding dress.

And she describes it like this. No amount of corseting or binding gave me a perfect shape. The dress didn't fit well.

And as I was wheeling into church, I accidentally ran over the hem of my dress leaving a greasy tire mark. I certainly didn't feel like the perfect picture, perfect bride in a bridal magazine.

[11 : 00] And then, she caught a glimpse of her groom, standing tall, craning his neck, looking around with eyes only for her.

She writes, my face flushed. Suddenly, I couldn't wait to be with him. I'd seen my beloved. The love in his face washed away all my feelings of unworthiness.

I was his pure and perfect bride. And so if that's us, if we are feeling awkward or flawed in any way or unworthy, then the answer is the same.

Lift your eyes from yourself and turn your gaze to the groom. So let's meet him. The groom, the bridegroom who loves you to death.

Isaiah puts it like this. As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you. Let's just pause and let that sink in.

[12 : 12] As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you. Not merely tolerate you, not merely put up with you, not even just simply love you, but rejoice over you, delight in you.

That's the posture, emotionally, if I can put it like that, of God towards his people. We've already seen what kind of bride we are. We're flawed.

We're painfully aware of our own shortcomings and stains. So the real question is, what kind of groom rejoices over a bride like that?

Well, Paul answers in Ephesians 5, verse 25. Christ loved the church. Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing of water through the word and to present her to himself as a radiant church without any blemish, but holy and blameless.

There's two huge things here. First, out of his love for the church, Christ gives himself up for her.

[13 : 35] And that's not poetry. That's love in action. Love that intervenes. Love that costs. A friend of mine, we'll call her Zoe, was out to lunch with her future husband, Alex.

And everything seemed fine. Then, momentarily, her face drooped, her speech slurred. It was over in just a second or two, but it passed quickly.

It was easy to ignore, easy to explain away. But Alex wouldn't let it go. And later, he admitted in his wedding speech that he's a self-professed hypochondriac, but in any case, he insisted on medical attention.

At the hospital, they initially dismissed it. She was only 30 after all. But Alex pushed back. He wouldn't budge. And while she was being examined, she had another, more serious stroke.

Because she was already there, the doctors acted immediately and saved her life. She made a full recovery and they are married now. Well, that's what love looks like.

[14:46] It notices danger and steps in decisively at all costs. That's the kind of groom Jesus is. Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

And to help us to feel the weight of that, God gave us a picture long before Jesus steps onto the scene. And in the Old Testament, God says something truly shocking to the prophet Hosea up on the screen there.

Go marry a promiscuous woman. For like an adulterous wife, this land that is God's people living in Israel is guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord.

Hosea's marriage is meant to be a mirror. His wife is repeatedly unfaithful and God says, that's what my people are like.

See, sin isn't just rule-breaking. It's relationship betrayal. It's spiritual adultery. It's loving something, anything more than God.

[15:58] And yet God tells Hosea, go love her again. Buy her back. And so Hosea pays a high price of silver and barley to redeem his unfaithful wife.

So in human terms, Hosea shows us what Ephesians 5 assumes. Hosea shows us that the bride that Jesus loves isn't lovely in herself.

Hosea shows us that redemption is costly. And it shows us that God's love doesn't wait for our worthiness, thankfully.

He pursues us while we were still yet sinners. Now think about Jesus, our true bridegroom.

We're the unfaithful wife. And the price he pays, it's not silver or grain, but his own life, his own blood.

[17:05] Christ Jesus loves you and gave himself up at the cross. This is how we know what love is. Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.

No groom has ever loved or will ever love like Christ loves the church. See, all we bring is sin and shame.

He brings forgiveness and freedom. It doesn't stop there. The second huge thing in Ephesians 5, Paul tells us why Jesus gave himself up.

In order to make her holy, to present her to himself as a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

That's where this is heading. A wedding day, a radiant bride, not because she fixed herself, but because the groom gave himself for her.

[18:14] And here's the thing. The groom who died for his bride is the groom who defends his bride now. I was once at a conference with Kevin DeYoung.

He asked a room full of pastors, if someone publicly bad-mouthed your wife, what would you do? And it sort of excited a diplomatic response.

Some answered cautiously, well, I'd offer an olive branch. I'd try to calm things down. I'd try to rise above it. I'd ignore it. DeYoung said, no.

No, you wouldn't. You would step in. You'd defend it. You'd want to knock his block off because when somebody that you love is attacked like that, you defend her.

You step forward. Scripture tells us that Jesus feels that way about his bride. And in the book of Acts, when his people, the church, were attacked, Jesus said, why are you persecuting me?

[19:22] Mess with the bride and you mess with the groom. This is not a distant groom, not a reluctant groom. This is a groom who rejoices over you, who loved you to death on the cross and who is even now preparing you to meet him in glory.

Here is a groom then worthy of your trust. Here is a groom who is worthy of your love and affection and devotion. And that brings us to the long engagement, what this groom is doing now as he prepares his bride for the day when we will see him face to face.

In Tolstoy's War and Peace, the lovely Natasha is engaged to Prince Andre and he's away for a whole year.

She waits patiently, faithfully and on the very last night before he's due to return, a man named Anatoly enters the picture.

He's superficially charming, he's attentive, smooth, but he's also a real scoundrel. And as a reader, you're almost shouting at the book, no, don't do this, what are you thinking?

[20 : 40] Don't be fooled like that. Well, she very almost goes with him. A decision that would have destroyed her life. But at the last moment, Andre arrives and intervenes.

She's stopped, rescued, she's safe. That long engagement, that patient waiting, is a picture of the Christian life.

Like Natasha, we're waiting for our bridegroom to return. And while we wait, there's always Anatolys, temptations, distractions, easier substitutes.

They promise much, but they leave us empty. And you know yourself what your own personal Anatolys are, the substitute loves that would lure you away from following the Lord Jesus.

To wait for Christ isn't passive. It requires our faithfulness. It means saying no to the advances of anything, anyone, any other lovers that would seduce us away from our bridegroom.

[21 : 54] But one day, our bridegroom will come for us. The waiting will end and the bride who faithfully waits will be safe in his arms.

Revelation shows us how to live until that day. It's a book written for people in the middle, in between promise and fulfillment, between engagement and the wedding.

And again and again and again in Revelation, it calls for patient endurance and faithfulness, for obedience. And in Revelation 19, we see the end of the waiting.

So listen with me again from verse 6 of Revelation 19. Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder shouting, Hallelujah!

For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory. For the wedding of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready.

[23 : 06] fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear. Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God's holy people.

So after all of the waiting, the day has come, the wedding has come and the bride is made ready. But how? Well, notice what John is and isn't saying.

We've already seen how the groom gave his life to cleanse his bride once and for all. So this isn't about earning a place at the wedding. That's been settled at the cross.

This is about how the bride lives between engagement and the wedding day. And John is precise. The wording matters.

We read, it was given her to wear the fine linen, bright and clean. The linen is given to her and she wears it.

[24 : 12] It's grace and obedience in response to grace. Gift and response. And that brings us to the dress. I remember standing at the front of the church on my wedding day and any nerves that I might have had simply vanished when I saw Alice walk into the church.

Her smile radiant, stunningly beautiful. And then I noticed the dress. I recognized it. You see, earlier in the year we'd been to the art school degree show and Alice had fallen in love with the work of one particular textile designer.

And half jokingly I'd said to her, why don't you get in touch with her and see if she'd make you a wedding dress. And unbeknownst to me that's exactly what Alice had done.

And there she was. Well that dress was designed for her. The artist went on to work for a top wedding fashion house in New York. And the dress was given to her in a sense made for her.

But in another sense she still had to put it on. Well that's Revelation 19. We don't make ourselves ready for this wedding.

[25 : 32] We don't clothe ourselves in perfect beauty. We don't stitch together our own righteousness. We're adorned for Christ by Christ himself.

And to be dressed appropriately for this wedding we're given the perfect righteousness of another. holiness that we could never make ourselves. A beauty we could never produce on our own.

The bride is dressed by her groom. And yet grace doesn't leave us unchanged. Clothed in Christ's righteousness we begin to live and look like his bride.

John calls it fine linen the righteous acts of God's holy people. what does that look like? Paul gives us an illustration a portrait from a wedding catalogue in Colossians.

Clothe yourselves with compassion kindness humility gentleness and patience bearing with one another forgiving loving and above all these put on love.

[26 : 48] The bride's calling then is to make herself ready to meet her groom not by earning his love but by living in clothes of righteousness that fit who we are now.

Say yes to the dress not to earn his affection not to win his love but because the big day is coming so we must prepare for it.

If you've got a friend who's engaged and you'll know what they're like busy preoccupied excited about the wedding day are we excited for our wedding day?

Are we so infatuated like that? This long engagement reshapes life now including marriage.

For those of us married here your imperfect marriage reflects the one to come. It's not ultimate but it is a reflection not a destination but it is a signpost.

[28 : 04] Your marriage imperfectly mirrors the perfect union to come. Husbands that's why faithfulness matters.

Eyes only for your wives. Sacrificial love. Wives love. That's why you choosing to submit in love matters as the church submits to Christ.

And if you've been blessed in this life with a long and happy marriage then you've had a foretaste of heaven. Of course not everyone here is married.

you may have spent years yearning to be married. You may have felt deep and bitter disappointment, hurt, loneliness.

you may have simply come to a place where you've given up on the idea of being married altogether. I remember being at my youngest brother's wedding many years ago now, seven years younger than me and a well-meaning relative came up to me clearly thinking I was a lost cause and told me there must be somebody out there for you and praying hard for you.

[29 : 34] She meant well. But David Bennett is someone who knows that feeling. At age 14 he came out to his parents.

At 19 he encountered Jesus and that changed everything. And slowly he realized something costly. Following Jesus for him might mean never marry and it meant for him letting this dream die.

For a long time that felt like aching loss. And then he went to a friend's wedding. Something shifted. Let me read a short excerpt from his book.

Finally the couple's big day came. I sat on a pew and watched Tristan's bride Renee enter the chapel and walked down the aisle. She reached her bridegroom.

Her father blessed them as they joined hands. When Tristan and Renee exchanged their vows, tears filled my eyes.

[30 : 47] In that moment I saw marriage for what it really is. God's idea meant to reflect his glory. love was beautiful.

For the first time I didn't feel the jealousy and loneliness I sometimes felt at weddings or when I was with my married friends. Then the minister read from Song of Songs the same passage we read earlier.

Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm, for love is as strong as death. It's jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame.

Many waters cannot quench love. Rivers cannot sweep it away. As David listened to those words he realized that being single didn't exclude him from this kind of intense covenant love.

Marriage wasn't something that he was shut out from. It was something that was promised to him. A bigger marriage, a truer union, a love stronger than death itself.

[31 : 55] In Christ he belonged to the bride. And so do you. So do you. If you are a Christian, you are engaged to be married.

You've been sealed to the bridegroom by the Holy Spirit. And he will show up on time, without fail.

whoever you are here tonight, if you belong to Christ, that wedding photo at the end of time, you will be in it. By your faith in Christ, your face will be there.

The thing is, when the group shot of Jesus and his church happens, you won't just be a face in the crowd, you won't be just blurred in the background, your face will be caught up in the face of the bride.

That's what all this has been pointing forward to, from Genesis to Revelation, from first promise to fulfillment. Your face will be in that wedding photo. One day, the waiting will end, the wedding will begin and the marriage will last forever.

[33 : 09] And the only tears will be tears of joy. So until that day, keep yourselves for him.

Resist the Anatole's refuse the substitute love. Say no to the lesser love. Say yes to the dress. Because blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb.

Hallelujah. And let's pray. Lord God, what an astonishing love you have shown us.

Thank you for the Lord Jesus, for his death on the cross, for cleansing us and making us pure. Thank you for the picture of marriage that points us to the greater marriage between Christ and his church.

We pray for the marriages among us at St. Silas. would you grant integrity, faithfulness, and tenderness.

[34 : 20] Would you help husbands and wives to cherish one another well. And by your Holy Spirit, help each of us, whatever our relationship status, to put on the garments of righteousness, to live in holiness, preparing ourselves to meet the Lord Jesus face to face.

Guard us from temptation. Expose false loves and empty substitutes. Keep us faithful to Christ. And loving Father, please comfort those who have been disappointed or wounded by human love.

Meet them with your fierce and faithful love. love. And for any here who do not yet belong to the bride, would you pursue them with your mercy and draw them to Christ.

Keep us faithful until that day for the sake of Jesus, our bridegroom. Amen. Now I'm going to respond to the bridegroom's love in song, and Greg and the band are going to lead us in that.

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