

The Bride Of Christ

Ephesians 5:25-27

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This morning, I'd like for you to turn with me again to Ephesians 5. We're not going to continue our exposition through this passage, but in preparation for the Lord's Table this morning, I want to share with you some thoughts that have grown out of this text for me as I have meditated on it in the last number of weeks.

It's interesting to me that the New Testament uses a number of metaphors to try to describe to us what our relationship to God is like and specifically our relationship to Christ. It uses the metaphor of a body. We are the body of Christ, and Christ is the head.

It uses the metaphor of a building in which Christ is the cornerstone, and we the individual stones that make up that place of worship.

The New Testament describes the church as a flock of sheep and Christ as the good Shepherd.

It describes us as a household or a family in which God is the Father, and Jesus Christ is our older brother, and we all siblings having been adopted into that family.

The question is why? Why do the writers of Scripture use these kinds of pictures? Well, what God is doing for us in Christ is completely outside the scope of our normal lives. To help us understand that something that is outside of our own field of experience, the New Testament writers used things that we are familiar with like buildings and bodies and sheep and families in order to help us understand the spiritual realities which we could not otherwise grasp. So, it shouldn't surprise us then that the Scripture is full of these brilliant word pictures. And when God wants to describe to us the great mystery of the church – that is, His relationship with us, Jesus Christ's relationship with us as individual believers – He chooses to explain and illustrate it through a number of powerful but very familiar word pictures.

One of the most powerful images that He uses to illustrate our relationship – those of us who are in Christ, those of us who have acknowledged Him as Lord and Savior, who are His disciples – He describes our relationship to Jesus Christ as that of a bridegroom and a bride. That’s the very word picture that lies behind the passage we’ve been studying together in Ephesians 5 and the relationship between husbands and wives. In fact, look at it again. Ephesians 5:25,

Husbands, love your wives [there’s the command, but then he illustrates it], just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the Church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.

There it is – a picture, a picture to help us understand that compares Jesus Christ to a bridegroom and us who are His followers to a bride.

That picture is not new with the New Testament. In the Old Testament, Israel is often pictured as having been married to God. The prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 54:5 says, “For your husband is your Maker, Whose name is the LORD of hosts; And your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel, ... the God of all the earth.”

But when you come to the New Testament, the apostles of Christ use the image of marriage to describe our relationship to Him. You see that here in Ephesians 5. That’s really the image that lies behind all of this teaching about how wives are to submit to their husbands and husbands are to love their wives. You see it in Romans 7 where Paul says that we used to be married to the law, and then we died to the law when Christ died. And in Romans 7:4, he says all that happened so that we could be joined to or literally married to another; that is, to Jesus Christ. You see it in 2 Corinthians 11:1 and 2 where Paul says to the Corinthians, “... I betrothed you to one husband [that is, to Jesus Christ]...” You’re engaged to be married to Jesus Christ, he said.

Now, to fully appreciate this image that Paul uses, you have to understand that he’s not talking about twenty-first century marriage. Instead, he is expanding on a typical first century marriage. He writes to the church in Ephesus, and he uses this image. In the church in Ephesus, there were

primarily two kinds of backgrounds. There were Jewish people, and there were Greeks. Well, both Jewish and Greek ceremonies in the first century had much in common, and he draws on their shared experience and paints this picture of Christ as the bridegroom and us as the bride. The question is what does he intend to communicate with this picture? Obviously, Christ is not really a bridegroom in every sense, and we are not truly His bride in the same sense that happens here, but there is in that image, in that picture a lesson for us to learn.

So, what is the lesson? What are the points of connection? What are the points of similarity between a first century marriage and our relationship to Christ? What can this metaphor teach us this morning about Christ and our relationship to Him?

As we prepare for the Lord's Table this morning, I don't want to deal with the husband-wife relationship. We'll come back to that Lord willing next Sunday and continue to teach through this passage. But instead, today, I want to sort of share with you the overflow of my own meditation on the points of similarity between a first century wedding and our relationship to Christ. What can this metaphor teach us?

The first point of similarity (there are several of them, but let me give you the first point of similarity). It's the Father chose a bride for His Son. The Father chose a bride for His Son. For the last couple of hundred years, those who live in the Western world have had the opportunity to essentially exclusively make the choice of who their wife would be. But that's not been the most common method throughout human history. And in fact, it's still uncommon in some cultures in our world even today. But the most common way throughout all of history, including the first century and back into the very beginning of time, was for a father to choose a bride for his son. Now there are countless illustrations of this throughout the Scripture. I want to take you to my favorite. Turn back to Genesis 24. Genesis 24. Here Abraham chooses a bride for his son Isaac. Genesis 24:1,

Now Abraham was old, advanced in age; and the LORD had blessed Abraham in every way. Abraham said to his servant [a man named Eleazar, who is at this point eighty-five and who stood to inherit everything until Isaac was born], the oldest of his household, who had charge of all that he owned, "Please place your

hand under my thigh, and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you ... [will] not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, but you will go to my country and to my relatives and take a wife for my son Isaac.’”

Isaac is here already of marriageable age, but he’s not initiating this process at all. It’s his elder father, Abraham, who initiates this process. And because he’s too old to go himself, he sends his servant, who’s now more than fifteen years his junior but eighty-five years old, on this mission of a four-hundred-and-fifty mile trip from where they were in Palestine all the way back to Mesopotamia to get a bride for his son. The father initiates the process.

This was still true, if we fast forward two thousand years, this was still true of both Jewish and Greek weddings in the first century. A father selected a bride for his son. I love that because it’s a wonderful image of what God has done because that is exactly what God the Father has done. He has selected a bride for His Son. In theological terms, He made a sovereign choice. Our marriage to Christ was a prearranged marriage. It was not the bride who initiated the marriage, but the Father of the Bridegroom. Isn’t that what Paul hints at in Ephesians 1:4 when he says, “... He [that is, the Father] chose us in ... [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love....”?

But I want you to turn back to John 17 because in John 17 – we saw this several months ago when I walked through this passage and showed you the great theme of the Bible. John 17 is Christ’s High Priestly Prayer prayed just hours – it’s the longest prayer of His we have on record, and it was prayed just hours before His death. And listen to how He speaks about His disciples. John 17:1,

Jesus spoke these things; and lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said, “Father, the hour has come [just hours away from His crucifixion at this point]; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, even as You gave Him authority over all flesh [now watch this], that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life.”

He's saying, Father, You have given certain ones to Me, and You've given Me authority to give them eternal life. You've given Me a bride. He goes on to make the same point throughout this passage. Verse 6, "I've manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me out of the world; they were Yours and You gave them to Me...." Verse 9, "I ask on ... behalf ... of those whom You have given Me...." And down in verse 20, He expands beyond the eleven. At this point, Judas is gone so it's the eleven disciples He's talking about. But in verse 20, He expands beyond the eleven, "I do not ask on behalf of these alone [just the eleven], but for those also who believe in Me through their word...." Now you tell me. Who believes in Christ through the words of the apostles? That's us. Jesus is praying for us.

And notice how He describes us over in verse 24, "Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world."

The point is God the Father chose a bride for His Son. He gave us as a gift to His Son. But here's the remarkable thing. The Father's choice of a bride was most unusual. In the first century when a father chose a bride, he wanted to identify a woman who was of a similar background, who was of a similar station in life, who was of the same socioeconomic status, who was of the same basic level of intelligence, who basically was an equal in many ways. But thank God that's not what God the Father did when He sought a bride for His Son. Instead of choosing a bride that was qualified, He chose those who were totally undeserving.

The bride the Father chose is not, was not, never will be worthy of her position. In fact, in Ephesians 5, did you notice that we're referred to as those who need to be sanctified, who need to be cleansed, who have spots or stains on our souls, who have wrinkles, who need to become holy and blameless? We were nothing Christ ultimately wanted us to be.

In fact, if you go back to chapter 2 of Ephesians, Paul tells us what we were like when we were betrothed to Christ as His bride. Chapter 2:1,

“... you were dead in trespasses and sins, [you didn’t know God. You had no relationship to God. The things about God didn’t matter at all. You had no spiritual existence whatsoever. You were a walking dead man], ... you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of air....” [In other words, you were in lockstep with Satan himself,] “... living (verse 3) ... in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and the mind, and we were by nature [by birth] children of [God’s] wrath....”

It’s like our middle name was wrath. It was such a reality; it was so certain to come. That’s who we were when God sought us out as a bride for His Son.

It reminds me of Ezekiel. Turn back to Ezekiel. There’s an amazing passage as God describes His saving of Israel, His election of Israel. Ezekiel 16. Listen to how He describes how He chose Israel to be His wife. In a sort of extended parable, he says in Ezekiel 16:1,

The word of the LORD came to me, saying, “Son of man, make known to Jerusalem her abominations [those things I hate] and say, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD to Jerusalem, “Your origin and your birth are from the land of the Canaanite, your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite [in other words, you’re pagan by birth]. As for your birth, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water for cleansing; you were not rubbed with salt or even wrapped in cloths.” [All things that were done to a newborn in that day - none of those things happened. In fact, nobody cared about you. You were to be discarded.] Verse 5, “No eye looked with pity on you to do any of those things for you, to have compassion on you. Rather you were thrown into the open field, for you were abhorred on the day you were born.” [You were discarded. Nobody wanted you.] Verse 6,

“When I passed by you and saw you squirming in your blood, I said to you *while you were* in your blood, ‘Live!’ Yes, I said to you *while you were* in your blood, ‘Live!’ I made you numerous like plants of the field. Then you grew up,

you became tall and reached the age for fine ornaments; *your* breasts were formed and your hair had grown. Yet you were naked and bare.

Then I passed by you and saw you, and behold, you were at the time for love [in other words, you were of a marriageable age]; so I spread My skirt over you and covered your nakedness. I also swore to you and entered into a covenant with you so that you became Mine,” declares the LORD....”

Here’s how God chose Israel. He chose Israel when nobody wanted ‘em. Nobody cared and He made them His own. That’s exactly what He did with us. It was pure grace. The Father chose a bride for His Son, and He chose those who were totally undeserving, who were the castoffs whom nobody cared about. The Father sovereignly chose a bride for His Son.

There’s a second point of similarity between a first century marriage and our relationship to Christ. The bridegroom set His love upon the bride his father chose. The bridegroom set his love upon the bride his father chose. In the ancient world when a father had made the choice of who his son would marry, the son was supposed then to set his love upon that woman, to set his affection upon the one whom his father had chosen. It’s a reminder, by the way, that true love is not based on emotion. True love is an act and decision of the will which emotions follow. You see this in the story of Isaac again. Go back to Genesis 24. When Eleazar finally shows up with Rebekah - he makes the four-hundred-and-fifty-mile trip back from Mesopotamia, back from Ur, back to where Abraham and Isaac are living. Verse 63 of Genesis 24 says,

Isaac ... [was] out ... [meditating] in the field toward evening [no doubt thinking about his bride-to-be, reflecting on the death of his, recent death of his mother]; and he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, camels were coming. Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac she dismounted from the camel. She said to Eleazar the servant, “Who is that man walking in the field to meet us?” And the servant said, “He is my master.” Then she took her veil and covered herself [she wasn’t to be seen by her husband in that culture until after they married.] The servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then Isaac

brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and he took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her; thus Isaac was comforted after his mother's death."

[He set his love upon her because she was his father's choice.]

When the Father chose us as a bride for His Son, our Lord as the bridegroom determined to set His love upon us. Three times in Ephesians 5 we're told Jesus loved us. Ephesians 5:2 – "Christ loved you and gave Himself up for us, [as] an offering and a sacrifice to God...." Ephesians 5:25 – "Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her..." Ephesians 5:28,

... husbands ... love [your own] wives as [your] own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also *does* the church....

I want you to think about that for a moment. We hear those words all the time. Jesus Christ was given us before the foundation of the world as a love gift from His Father as His bride, and He determined, in spite of who we were, to set His love upon us, to love us.

How do we know the true depth of Christ's love for us? Well, that brings us to the third point of similarity. Christ paid the ultimate dowry for His bride. Christ paid the ultimate dowry for His bride. You see, in the ancient world, usually if at the time the engagement or the betrothal was formalized between the two families, the bridegroom presented two gifts or two dowries. The first one was to the bride's father. It was a recognition that he would no longer have her help. He would be deprived of her gifts and all that she brought to the family in the future, and so he gave a gift to the bride's father.

But the bridegroom also presented his bride-to-be with a gift. It's a different, in the Old Testament, it's a different Hebrew word, but in English it's sometimes also called a dowry. It was simply a marriage gift, a wedding present to his wife who was now engaged to him. You see it again back in Genesis 24. As soon as it's agreed that Rebekah will marry Isaac, verse 52,

When Abraham's servant heard their words, he bowed himself to the ground before the LORD. [And] The servant brought out articles of silver and articles of gold, and garments, and he gave them to Rebekah; he also gave precious things to her brother and to her mother.

These were gifts from the bridegroom Isaac, who wasn't there but represented by Eleazar, to the bride. It was his wedding present. It was a demonstration of his love to his wife.

Jesus also gave us a wedding gift. He loved His bride, and He demonstrated His love in the wedding gift He gave her. In Ephesians 5:25, listen to the gift: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave (what?) Himself for her...." He gave Himself. Jesus laid down His life in violent death for His bride. Everything Jesus could have given from all the wealth that He possessed as owner of heaven and earth, but instead He loved us so much - Christian, He loved you so much - that He gave Himself. He loves us so much that His wedding present to us was to give Himself to redeem us from the penalty our sins deserved. And we receive that gift by faith alone, by simply believing in Christ as Lord and Savior.

There's a fourth point of similarity between a first century marriage and our relationship to Christ. Christ is preparing a home for His bride. Christ is preparing a home for His bride. This beautiful image grows out of the marriage customs of the first century. In the typical Jewish and Greek weddings of the first century, there were two parts. For the Jewish people, the first was very serious. The first part was the betrothal. For the Jewish people, this was more serious and binding than our engagements are. In the presence of witnesses, the man and the woman and their families agreed to the marriage. God's blessing was pronounced over the union. This betrothal period during which they were committed to each other but had not yet been married was called by the rabbis "kiddushin". It was a binding contract. From the day the betrothal period began, they were legally man and wife. The man was referred to as her husband and she as his wife.

During the "kiddushin", that engagement period, the betrothal period, if the man died, the woman was called a widow. Any form of sexual sin during that period was called adultery, and

the guilty party was to be stoned according to Deuteronomy 22. If they wanted to end the betrothal, call it off, they had to get a divorce. But in spite of the seriousness of that commitment, they still lived separately, and they were not allowed to consummate the marriage. Usually the “kiddushin”, that betrothal period, was enough to complete the arrangements for the wedding, typically not longer than twelve months’ time. And when everything was ready, then the date for the wedding and the wedding feast was set.

But there was one very important matter that had to be taken care of during that betrothal period, during the “kiddushin”. The bridegroom had to prepare a place for him and his new bride to live. It was often, in that culture, an addition to his parents’ home. In fact, if you go to Israel today, you can see in certain of the cultures there, there’ll be a large building and then jutting off of that home will be additions as sons have married and built a place for them and their families to live.

The same is true for us. We today have been betrothed to Christ according to Paul. We live in the “kiddushin”. We’ve been betrothed to Christ, but our Bridegroom has gone away. And part of the reason He’s gone away is to prepare a place for us, His bride. Look at John 14. That’s the context of Jesus’ comments in John 14:1 in the upper room discourse, the night before His death. He says in verse 1,

“Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house [and unfortunately, there’s a bad translation here, in some translations that says “are many mansions”. That’s not what it says at all. There’s the Father’s house and in His Father’s house] are many dwelling places [or we could say apartments or condominiums, townhomes]; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, *there* you may be also.”

Christ, as our bridegroom during this time of the betrothal before the marriage ceremony, is preparing a place for us, His bride. It’s in His Father’s house, a special place for us.

So, so far, we've seen four points of similarity. The Father chose a bride for His Son.

The bridegroom set His love upon the bride.

Thirdly, Christ paid the ultimate dowry for His bride.

And four, Christ is preparing a home for His bride.

The fifth point of similarity is Christ is preparing His bride for the wedding. Christ is preparing His bride for the wedding. You see, the final culmination of the betrothal period, the “kiddushin”, was the final preparations for the wedding itself. And in preparation for the wedding, the bride would bathe herself and prepare and adorn herself. In fact, I read that passage earlier from Ezekiel 16. Listen to how God clothed Israel. And this is obviously figurative language, but how He clothed Israel for the wedding. Ezekiel 16:9 –

“... I bathed you with water, ... [I] washed off your blood from you and anointed you with oil. I ... clothed you with embroidered cloth and put sandals of porpoise skin on your feet; and I wrapped you with fine linen and covered you with silk. I adorned you with ornaments, [I] put bracelets on your hands and a necklace around your neck. I ... put a ring in your nostril, earrings in your ears and a beautiful crown on your head. Thus, you were adorned with gold and silver, and your dress was of fine linen, silk, and embroidered cloth. ... so you were exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty.”

A bride would prepare for the wedding. We now live in the “kiddushin”, but the wedding feast is coming. It's time for the bride to be prepared for the wedding. How? How do you and I prepare for the coming wedding with our Lord? Well in Ephesians 5, it says Christ Himself is preparing us. Notice what it says in the passage I read earlier, verse 26,

so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.

Folks, this is absolutely crucial. Like Old Testament Israel in Ezekiel 16, we cannot prepare ourselves for the wedding feast. We cannot sanctify ourselves. We cannot make ourselves like Jesus Christ. We cannot make ourselves holy. Christ Himself has to do it. And here's the good news. According to Ephesians 5, He will do it. When the day comes for the wedding, when He is done, the church – and that means each one of us individually who are truly His – will have no moral or spiritual stains left, no wrinkles, but we will be holy and blameless. He's preparing us for the wedding through life and its troubles, its difficulties, through His Word, through the washing of the water of the word as Paul describes it. He's cleansing our souls. It's a progressive thing here. We'll never be perfect in this life, but when the day comes, we stand before Him, we will be holy and blameless, having no stain on our souls and our having moral resemblance to Jesus Christ.

There's one final point of similarity between the first century marriage and, and our relationship to Christ. It's this: Christ will come to take His bride to His home forever. Christ will come to take His bride to His home forever. You see, the second part of the Jewish marriage – the first part was the “kiddushin”, the betrothal – but the second part of the Jewish marriage was called the “chuppah”. The groom would get all ready, clean himself and dress in his best clothes. And then accompanied by his friends and his family, he would leave his house (usually this happened in the early evening), and he would be preceded by torchbearers singing and dancing in the streets through the little village or through the larger city. And they would go ahead of him through the town to where his bride lived, singing and dancing and rejoicing.

When the procession arrived at the bride's home, she would join them. Often, if it was a larger city, she'd be put in a wagon or a cart of some kind that was carefully decorated, and she and her bridegroom would go back to the groom's home for the wedding feast. That night, the marriage was consummated. But sometimes, the festivities lasted up to a week; in fact, on one occasion, it

lasted two weeks. And we thought our children's weddings were expensive. How long do you have to save to make that happen?

That second part of the Jewish marriage, the "chuppah", provides the background for Ephesians 5:26 and 27. The church has been betrothed to Christ. He loved her and He gave as her dowry His own life. And now He's away during this "kiddushin" period. He's away preparing a place for us to live, a place in the Father's house for His bride. And someday, He will return for His bride. We call that event the rapture. While Christians may argue about the timing of the event, we all agree that it will happen. Listen to Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 and 17,

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of *the* archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. [He will take us. He'll come and take us back to His Father's house and to the place He's been preparing.]

Remember what He said in John 14? "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also." There we will celebrate the wedding feast, what Revelation calls the marriage supper of the Lamb. And we will live with Him forever as the special objects of His love and affection. In fact, after the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth, the Scripture tells us in Revelation that we will live in a special place prepared just for us, a kind of bridal city, called the New Jerusalem that will be part of a new heaven and a new earth. It's called –it looks, John says, like a bride prepared for her husband descending out of heaven. That's because the bride of Christ will live there. What a beautiful metaphor. How rich is this picture of our relationship to Christ?

You know, there are many lessons and implications that come from this wonderful metaphor of Christ as the bridegroom and us as the bride. There's the demand for our spiritual loyalty and commitment to Him while He's preparing a place for us. We ought to be loyal and faithful to

Him. There's the expectation that we will submit to Him as His bride. We will do what He wants and not what we want.

There's the implication in this metaphor of the depth of spiritual intimacy that we can enjoy with Christ and will enjoy with Christ. Understand we're still in the betrothal period. You think you know Jesus Christ today? It's almost, you haven't seen Him just as Isaac hadn't seen Rebekah. But the day will come when we'll be with Him, and we will know as we are known.

There's the implication of all of those things, but for me, the greatest and most wonderful implication that comes out of this metaphor is (are you ready for this?) Christ's personal delight in us. Listen to Isaiah 62:5. God says, "As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so your God will rejoice over you." That's how Christ thinks of us as His bride. He rejoices over us. He delights in us.

Next year, Sheila and I will celebrate twenty-five years of marriage, but I still remember our wedding day as if it were yesterday. I remember seeing her come to the back door of that auditorium and see her walk down the aisle. I remember standing there, hand in hand, as we enjoyed the moment and smiled at one another and talked about the things that we're going on.

That is on, at the human level, life's greatest moment of happiness, but it amazes me to think that that is how Jesus Christ thinks of me and of all of those who know Him. He loves us and delights in us as a bridegroom does in his bride on the day of the wedding. Even now, He wants us to think of it like this. He's sitting in heaven, and He can hardly wait for the day the Father says, "It's time. Go for your bride."

Let's pray together.

Our Father, we thank You for the reminder that our Lord was a willing sacrifice, that for His bride He gladly laid down His life as the ultimate dowry to redeem us, to make us His own. Father, help us to live in light of the truth we've been reminded of today. Help us to remember there is in the picture of a bridegroom and a bride the picture of our Lord's love for us and of our

devotion to Him. Lord, may we be faithful even as He is now preparing a place for us, waiting for the day when You signal that it's time – time for Him to come and receive His own. Father, may we be faithful, may we be loyal. May we grow in our devotion to Him, our love for Him. May we long for the day when we are with Him and when we're like Him.

And Lord, I pray for the person here today who's not in Christ. Lord, undoubtedly in a congregation this size, there are those here who have dabbled in Christianity, who have perhaps even prayed a prayer, made some profession in their past, but who are truly not disciples of Jesus Christ. I pray that You would make that very obvious to them. May they see themselves as You see them, and may they see Christ in all the beauty that He possesses. And may they want nothing more than to leave their sin to gain Him. Lord, do this work. Draw them whom You have given to Your Son to Yourself even this day.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.