

## **Jesus: the Bridegroom**

Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?" Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast" (Matthew 9:14,15) Here Jesus gives us another name and another relationship, the Bridegroom and his bride. To better understand the relationship Jesus is suggesting, we need to look at the Jewish marriage custom. It begins with the joyful celebration of the announced betrothal of a couple. For Jews the betrothal was as binding as the marriage. During the betrothal the couple were known as man and wife even though they did not yet have the full rights of a married couple. Still the betrothal was so binding that to end it required a formal divorce. Following the announcement of the betrothal, there was a time of preparation for both the bride and the groom, usually about a year. Each had particular responsibilities to make themselves ready for the wedding. The bride went through various purification rituals while the groom made preparations for their new home. During this time there was great anticipation as the couple waited for the ultimate arrival of their Wedding Day.

What does Jesus want us to understand about our relationship with him when he refers to himself as the bridegroom? Perhaps it is to tell us that our faith, our religion is not unlike a young bride being proposed to. To be married was the

zenith of joy for a young Jewish girl. Accepting and announcing the proposal was cause for great celebration. John's disciples were upset with Jesus' disciples because they did not fast or mourn. It was a difficult time for God's people; it had been for hundreds of years. But with the arrival of Jesus, well as the song says, "the times they are a-changin'." Jesus says, "How can they fast and mourn. An engagement has been announced!" We've seen how a newly engaged girl acts. She walks around with her hand elevated showing off her ring, letting people know there is going to be a wedding. Jesus is saying. The gospel, the good news is, *There's going to be a wedding!* I have come to ask for the hand of my beloved and she has said yes! How can you ask people to fast at a time like this?

All of us know at least a little about being in love, the joy of the presence of our beloved, the longing for that presence when we are parted. People in love whistle and dance and laugh a little more than usual. When we are in love we can even be a little over-dramatic. I still remember when I met my first love, Patty Fisher. I looked forward to seeing her every day. She was seven, I was five but what's two years when you are in love? I remember one day Patty and I and our friend Randy Brown were playing in a tree outside my house. Patty fell out of the tree and got hurt. Mother took her inside to attend to her injuries. Randy and I sat on the outside porch frantically waiting for news on her condition. Mother finally

came out. Randy asked, “Is Patty okay.” I remember asking, “Is she alive!?” You can’t blame Randy. He didn’t have the same relationship with Patty that I had.

Years later those early, childish feeling would give way to a more mature love when I actually did meet the true love of my life, Lisa. After our engagement, we dated for a year separated by the over 500 miles between Lubbock and Houston. Much of our courtship, too much of it, was spent longing to see each other and to enjoy each other’s presence. A lot of our time together was spent in airports waiting to say hello and having to say goodbye to each other. We longed for the day when we could live together and not be separated.

God’s desire is the same; he longs to dwell with his beloved. The biblical story from Genesis to the cross could be titled, as the Christian author Gene Edwards has titled it, “The Divine Romance.” God was separated from his beloved in Eden and the story of the Old Testament is on the one hand the persistent attempt of God to restore relationship with the one he loves and on the other hand the maddening stubbornness of this bride to just as persistently be fickle and play the harlot. The book of Hosea, more than that, the whole life of Hosea is scripted to be a story of the faithful love of God for his unfaithful bride.

Throughout this story God’s faithful love is not frustrated and the prophets speak of the messianic bridegroom’s love for his bride, his betrothment and his ultimate return to finally consummate his love in joyous reunion. Isaiah says it like this.

*For your maker is your husband, the Lord Almighty is his name... the Lord will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit, a wife who married young, only to be rejected... for a brief moment I abandoned you but with deep compassion I will bring you back... though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken (Isaiah 54:5-8, 10)... No longer will they call you Deserted...you will be called Hephzibah...for the Lord will take delight in you... as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you (Isaiah 62:4,5).*

Jesus is appropriating for himself the prophetic picture of God in the Old Testament, the Messianic bridegroom who is one day coming for his bride. The gospel Jesus is proclaiming is God incarnate saying, "I want to marry you. I know you have been unfaithful. I know your love for me can at times be fickle. But my love for you is forever, steadfast." Baptism is our acceptance of our bridegroom's marriage proposal; it is saying to our Lord, "I will." In baptism we are betrothed, engaged, not yet married, but to be betrothed is every bit as serious, no less a commitment than marriage. You don't say yes to a marriage proposal until you are ready to be faithful to one person. William Barclay wrote, "There can be no such relationship without fidelity. God will never be unfaithful to us, and we must never be unfaithful to God; sin is not a breach of the law but a crime against love. And so our betrothal is a time set aside for us to be made ready to be a beautiful and

faithful bride. The scripture refers to the cleansing of the bride. *Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.* (Eph. 5:25-27) A similar scripture is found in Revelation. *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.* (Rev. 19:7-8)

When we accept our Lord's proposal a change should come over us; we clean up our act. That shouldn't surprise us. Ever notice the change in people when they are in love. A young man will comb his hair; take a bath; wear better clothes; wash his car; take a bath; clean his room; wax his car; take a bath; vacuum his car. Essentially, we do what mom and dad always told us to do. But now we do it not because we're told to but because we want to. We learn the principle that *love accomplishes what law cannot.*

I think that is why Jesus immediately follows with the parable of the wineskins. *No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse.* <sup>17</sup> *Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.* (Matt 9:16-17).

The two wineskins indicate two different kinds of relationships between God and man, two different covenants. The old wineskins refers to the old covenant of Law. The new wineskins refers to the new covenant that was to be established through the ministry of Jesus. The new wine that bursts the old wineskins is the Spirit of God which is to be poured out into us when we enter into the new covenant relationship. This is the covenant prophesied by Jeremiah and more fully explained in the book of Hebrews. *"The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them, " declares the LORD. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.* (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8:10)

Paul talks about this same new covenant in his second letter to the Corinthians. *He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.<sup>7</sup> Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?<sup>9</sup> If the ministry that brought condemnation was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that*

*brings righteousness! For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. And if what was transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!* (3:6-11)

Jesus' picture of this new covenant, this new relationship he makes available for us, is a marriage relationship. The washing, cleansing and dressing of the bride in Jewish marriage is parallel to washing, cleansing and renewing of the believer through Holy Spirit in us. We who have said "I will" to the bridegroom, we who have been baptized, and according to Peter's words in Acts 2:38, have received the spirit, and Paul says in our baptism we have experienced the *washing of rebirth and renewal of Holy Spirit* (Titus 3:4-7). Now we wait and long for our wedding day.

And our bridegroom is preparing for that day. Jesus even now is doing what every good Jewish bridegroom does. In fact we have his very words telling us what he is doing during this preparation time. *Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.* (John 14:1-3) That day our Lord returns will be our glorious wedding day. But isn't that a day of Judgment, a day of fear and dread? Yes for some. But for us it is no day to dread. What bride dreads her wedding day?

Christians look forward to that day. The early Christian greeting says it all.

*Maranatha! Lord come quickly.*

It is hard to wait at times. I have become much more aware of that these last two years as I have watched both my daughter and my niece wait for their wedding day. They literally counted down the days, making daily entries on facebook as they joyously looked forward to the day when they would be introduced as Mrs Bullock, Mrs Dupont. Every bride and every wedding should be a parable for us, reminding us of our own relationship with Christ. We too are looking forward to the day we can hear the words declared by the Father in tones that echo across the universe, I now pronounce you husband and wife and then hear the heavens filled with a recessional overture more glorious than Bach or Beethoven or Mozart could write in a thousand life times.

I think it is important we understand that as Christians our life right now is not life after the wedding but life waiting for the wedding. We are betrothed to the King and we await our great day. Scripture calls it “the blessed hope of his return.” But, the return of the King is not the end of our story; in a very real sense it is only the beginning of a new chapter in our story, the most important chapter of our story. Many of you have seen that glorious ending in the film version of Tolkein’s “Return of the King” the conclusion to the Lord of the Rings trilogy. There is a celebration at the end of the movie as Aragorn is crowned the rightful

king of Gondor. That celebration marks the end of a long and great struggle; but not the end of the story! Not at all. It is the happy transition to a new and far more glorious chapter of a story that never ends. And so it is with us.

But still, today we must wait, as a bride waits, for her great day. What the scriptures refer to as the “Wedding of the Lamb.” And sometimes the waiting can be difficult. Sometimes we become distracted by lesser things, or even worse we find ourselves flirting with other lovers. As the time passes we may even wonder if the groom has forgotten us. He said he went away to prepare a place for us. Sometimes we fear he just went away. Let me end with a song by the group Dogwood, entitled “A Love Note.” I think it expresses simply and beautifully the sentiments Jesus himself might express to us, his bride as she, as we, await his return. And since it is a song, I hope you won’t mind if I sing it to you.

*And I know by now you’re wondering when I’ll come;  
But remember you’re my Father’s chosen one.  
And in his own time He’ll send me to you.  
But until he does lean on the one I have sent you  
He will help to keep you from all other loves and lead you safely to my side.  
And all the time that’s come and gone has done no harm  
For I still am looking forward to the day  
When I hear my Father say, this is your wedding day, go on my child go on.  
And all the time that’s come and gone has done no harm  
For I still am looking forward to the day  
When I hear my Father say, this is your wedding day, go on my child go on.*

Are you still looking forward to the day? Are you remaining faithful or have you been playing the harlot letting other loves draw you away from your first love? Have you even responded to the divine proposal? Faithful Love has been offered to you by Jesus, the heavenly bridegroom who came down to show us the divine love heaven feels for us. May we be a joyous, eager, humble, thankful, faithful bride.