

The Wedding Day

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Published by NTChurchSource.com

There are many pictures given in the scriptures that describe our relationship with Jesus, such as "the body of Christ," "the household of God," "citizens" of God's kingdom, and "the temple of God." Each one illustrates and emphasizes an aspect of this relationship. Another one that is full of meaning likens the relationship of the church to Jesus as His wife, or bride. The marriage relationship is the most intimate relationship known to mankind, so it should be no wonder that Paul draws on it to illustrate certain truths of our relationship to God. God's original design and purpose for the marriage relationship has been greatly affected by sin, and in many ways has almost been lost. But when we come to the Lord, the Holy Spirit works to lift us back into God's original purpose in marriage, so that the family will properly fit in with His purpose in the church.

There is a great day coming that every believer is looking forward to. God has been working toward it since before time began. It is called "the marriage supper of the Lamb." It is the final consummation of our relationship with Jesus, when we will be "married" to Him for all eternity. What a glorious thought! How can we begin to comprehend what God has prepared for those who love Him? Yet we are told that the Spirit is revealing these things to us day by day as we are able to receive them.

"And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, 'Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.' And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he said to me, 'Write: 'Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!'' And he said to me, 'These are the true sayings of God.'" (Revelation 19:6-9)

Although the Holy Spirit begins to renew our minds in all areas, including marriage, immediately upon coming to the Lord, the work is not completed overnight. It takes time and obedience for the effects of sin to be dealt with and purity of thought to take root in our minds and lives. Paul says Jesus does this through the "washing of water by the word" (Ephesians 5:26). As the word of God comes to us in all the ways God chooses, when we recognize it as the word of God and receive it, it has a washing or cleansing effect. As our thinking is transformed, it opens the door for our lives to be transformed as we walk in the light that comes to us.

"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church." (Ephesians 5:25-32)

In the scriptures above, notice the parallel between the natural marriage relationship and the spiritual relationship of the church and Christ. Paul speaks of both almost in the same breath. Both are a mystery. The highest mystery is Christ and the church, and the lesser mystery is used to illustrate the

greater. The reverse is also true. If we have a clear revelation of the relationship of the church to Christ, it can help to wash our minds and give us light to walk in for the earthly marriage relationship.

It is in this way we want to use the picture here, drawing upon God's purpose in Christ for the church to provoke our thinking and clarify God's purpose in marriage, and particularly the wedding day. The motive is to encourage a couple preparing for the wedding day to think about marriage in light of God's purpose. Doing so should make the day more meaningful to everybody. Rather than rituals or traditions that have no meaning to God, the wedding day can be a great opportunity to declare and experience more of God's purpose.

Of course the wedding day is only the beginning. The vision must be walked in through the coming years. But God desires a "clear sound" in everything we say and do, and the wedding day is a wonderful opportunity to give that testimony before men. Our encouragement is to that end.

The Engagement Period

The engagement period is the time from the initial commitment of the couple to each other until the wedding day. One scriptural example is the story of Joseph and Mary. In the Jewish tradition, engagement or "betrothal" was a one-year period. The commitment was binding, and the only thing that could break it was unfaithfulness. Thus, when Mary was found to be with child, Joseph intended to break the betrothal until God supernaturally revealed the truth to him.

During the engagement period, the couple has time to prepare for marriage. In addition to physical preparations such as a home of their own, they must make adjustments in their thinking as they consider their future life together. Up to that point they have only had to think of themselves. They did not even know if they were going to get married, and may have never considered some things. There are big adjustments on both sides, which take time. God has allowed time for these to take place. If both husband and wife allow God to prepare them, the beginning of their life together will be a wonderful experience.

God is working this same thing in the church. Our initial commitment to God is the beginning of our engagement to Him. I believe this is what Paul refers to in Ephesians: *"In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory."* (Ephesians 1:13-14)

The marriage supper of the Lamb has not yet taken place. This is the time of preparation. Our faithfulness to Christ is being proven. The Holy Spirit has been given as a guarantee or "down payment" of our inheritance. God is serious about His commitment, and He has given of Himself to show that He is serious. He is preparing His bride for Himself that *"He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish."* Our marriage to Christ has not yet been consummated. At the marriage supper of the Lamb, the matter will be settled for all eternity.

Can we allow this to speak to us and make us more serious about the time we live in? So many take this relationship with Christ very lightly. We play with unfaithfulness, thinking it will not matter. Jesus said that he who is a friend of this world is an enemy of God. What if a bride flirts with other men during the engagement period? What if her future husband keeps looking at other women to see if there might be somebody better? What will happen after marriage? Will this change? That is the reason for the engagement period: to allow the initial commitment to affect every area of life and be proven, so

that on the wedding day when the marriage is consummated there is purity in the relationship.

I believe if a couple will take Christ and the church as their example during engagement, it will provide light to walk in to make this time very meaningful. While there are certainly some practical matters to be attended to, the primary preparation is in their relationship with God. If both diligently strengthen their relationship with God during this time, it will form the solid foundation that is needed on the marriage day and for the rest of their life together.

What Happens on the Wedding Day

What happens on the wedding day? Why is this day so special? Of course the surface answer is that a couple is now married and they may live together as husband and wife. But what does this mean in God? Is there more that God wants us to see and understand?

Consider the first wedding: *"And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. Then the rib which the Lord God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man. And Adam 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.' Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."* (Genesis 2:21-24)

This account may seem very distant from modern customs, but I believe we can find much here to give us direction. In this first marriage, we do not find pomp and ceremony, but only that God brought Eve to Adam and they became "one flesh." If we take the scripture for what it says, we can say very simply that on the wedding day, as a man and woman leave father and mother and cleave unto each other, two become one in God's eyes. The two are so truly one that Adam said Eve was *"bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh."* Our place is to accept this truth and let it affect every other expression.

When Paul uses this account in Genesis to teach us what God is doing in the church, he uses the same words. If we have been baptized into Christ by the Spirit, we are so one with God that we are *"members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones."* Paul says this is a tremendous mystery, a mystery once hidden which now has been revealed. God had this mystery in mind when He created marriage as it is. Everything in God's plan works in harmony. The marriage relationship teaches us about Christ and His church, and the church teaches us about the marriage relationship. They are designed by God to work together.

The importance of the wedding day is simply this: it is the culmination of the preparation of the engagement period, and it is the day when the man and woman leave father and mother and their union is begun before God and man. It is not what is said on the wedding day that makes them husband and wife, but what is done: leaving and cleaving. The remainder of their life together is lived on the basis "the two are now one," and this fact must control everything. The order that God has designed for marriage can only work if it is based on the reality that two are now one flesh in God's eyes. If we will always move from this revelation, I believe it will greatly help us to realize God's full purpose in the marriage union.

Who Marries People

There is a practical question we often encounter: who marries a couple? If we consider the Genesis account, I believe we must conclude that it was God who pronounced Adam and Eve one. He brought Eve to Adam and presented her as his wife. It was quite simple. No other man was involved.

Some may feel that this answer is too simplistic for our day, but I would ask us to seriously consider this question before God. Today so much of that original simplicity has been lost. Religious organizations and governments have stepped into the picture. But can we find any other place in the scripture where God's original plan has been altered or expanded? Personally, I cannot find it.

There are many who believe that the church marries people, but can we find this in the scripture? If not, why not? I believe there are at least three reasons we do not find it. First, according to the Genesis account, a couple is married in God's eyes when they leave father and mother and join themselves together as one. The church cannot bring about that union. Only a man and woman can, and once they do, it is God who pronounces them married in His sight because of their action. Man cannot add to this or take away from it. It is a fact before God, and man only observes or witnesses what takes place.

In addition, when the church or men in the church step into this place of pronouncing couples married, it takes our eyes off God and we begin to invest authority in men that they do not have. Where can we find in scripture that God gives men authority to pronounce a couple man and wife? When we go this way we can end up looking for man's approval to marry, for his blessing on the marriage, and worse than that, it opens the door for man to annul the marriage, contrary to the will of God. It puts man in a place that God never intended for him to be.

Thirdly, we do not see in the scripture that marriage is within the calling of the church. The church as the body of Christ is called to declare to the world the nature of God, which is love. It has never been called to "marry and bury," so to speak. The church is spiritual in nature, and when men even with their best intentions bring the church into functions God has not ordained for it, we are distracted from God's purpose and cannot know His blessings on these things.

There is no mediator between God and man other than Jesus Christ, and there should be no other person involved between a husband and his wife. It is a relationship between them alone. Only God can bring them together properly and only God can keep them together in a union. It is a step of faith between them and God. They must know that God has brought them together, and all of their expectation must be on God alone.

What about the government? Does the government determine who is married and who is not? We do not see any government of man at the first wedding. We also do not see government in later accounts, such as the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah (Genesis 24). Marriage is not an institution created by government. It was created by God alone. A government may pronounce a couple man and wife, but does that make it true? Similarly, a government may pronounce a divorce, but is that true? What do we do with this commandment of our Lord: *"So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."* (Matthew 19:6)

Civil governments have created laws for mankind to try to keep order in society according to man's understanding and the condition of the society at a particular time, but God's laws are much higher. They are timeless and cross-cultural. We should note at this point that God's law of marriage is for the human race, not just for Christians. Even if a couple does not acknowledge the authority of God, if they have joined themselves together, they are one in God's eyes and the relationship is valid until death separates them. They may never come to acknowledge Christ as Lord, but if they do, they were married before they came to the Lord and they are still married after they come to the Lord. Their response to the Lord does not alter the union that was created the day they left father and mother and became one flesh in God's eyes.

As Christians, then, what is our obligation to the laws of the land? Here is Peter's instruction:

"Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men-- as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God." (1 Peter 2:13-16)

From this I would conclude that God wants us to honor the civil laws of marriage as far as we can. But we do so for the sake of testimony, not to determine whether we are married or not. If a couple is married in God's eyes based on their union, they are man and wife whether they have obeyed the laws of the land or not. Furthermore, if they have not obeyed the laws of the land, their testimony before men may not be pure, but that does not give them a right to separate and marry again. If God has joined them, they are joined until death separates.

While these things may not be obvious to us at this time, I encourage each one to search the scriptures and see if these things are true. I would point us back to our Head who is Christ. He must reveal the truth to each one, that we may move in faith together in our union with Him.

Marriage Vows

In many cultures, marriage vows are exchanged on the wedding day. Some believe it is when these vows are exchanged that a man and woman become husband and wife. Although vows do express the intent of each heart, at that time the union has not yet been consummated. Obviously in most cases the union is consummated the same day, but I think it is important to realize that it is when the intended union is consummated that a couple is married in God's eyes. If we view the vows as an expression of love that is hidden in the heart, then they can be very meaningful, especially to the couple, as they declare their action before God and man. But I do not see any scriptural basis to say that vows create a union or a marriage.

I am not aware of any passage in scripture that speaks of wedding vows. That in itself may be significant. There is, however, an account in the book of Ruth that shows an example of the true commitment that God is looking for. If you have not read it through recently, I encourage you to do so. It is rich with meaning in the subject we are considering.

As Naomi was returning to Israel in grief after the death of her husband and sons, she greatly tested her relationship with her daughters-in-law. Orpah turned back under the test, but Ruth did not. It was a severe test. They both had every reason to turn back. Naomi offered them no hope, and she herself was full of despair. When she arrived home, this was her confession: *"... 'Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the Lord has brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?'"* (Ruth 1:20-21)

There was nothing in outward circumstances that could cause Ruth to want to follow Naomi or her God, yet somehow in the darkness she saw something that kept her on course, and at the crucial hour this was her confession: *"... 'Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. The Lord do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me.'"* (Ruth 1:16-17) What did Ruth see in Naomi or in her God that caused her to make this pledge? What she saw at the beginning was strong and real enough to carry her through to the end.

Life is full of trials. We do not know what tomorrow brings. But through all that comes, we must see further than the surface to enter into God's purpose. So many enter into marriage only looking at external things. In our modern age, self-fulfillment, security, and prosperity in this world are too often the highest goals. Marriage vows are taken very lightly. They often are not in the heart at all, just a formality repeated according to tradition. Thus, when the trials come, there is no root in God and the marriage falls apart. Heartache, bitterness, divorce, and adultery are often the result.

What is the answer? Before the wedding day, God gives us time to resolve these matters. The wedding is not all about beautiful dresses and romantic traditions. The wedding day is about a commitment deep within the heart. Vows should not come from a book; they must come from our heart, as Ruth's did. Where do they originate? They must have their roots in God and His love. Anything less has the seed of failure. God is the one who created the marriage institution and God is the only one who has the resources to make it work properly.

The blessings of marriage are beyond words, but they can only be realized out of a true relationship with God. Good as marriage vows may be, they cannot be kept apart from the grace of God. God is the source of all love, so if we try to love on our own, separate from a deep relationship with God, it will not be love at all. Self-effort always fails, sometime, somehow, but God's grace never fails. God is always working with eternity in mind, and every trial along the way is only a stepping stone into that purpose if we are seeing Him who is invisible and responding in faith as He leads us by His Spirit.

Listen to the end of the account of Ruth. *"So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife; and when he went in to her, the Lord gave her conception, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, 'Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a close relative; and may his name be famous in Israel! And may he be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons, has borne him.' Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her bosom, and became a nurse to him. Also the neighbor women gave him a name, saying, 'There is a son born to Naomi.' And they called his name Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David."* (Ruth 4:13-17)

Ruth was privileged to be brought into the lineage of King David and Christ our Lord. She was an outsider to Israel, but she was brought into a royal place by the grace and mercy of God because she saw something worth committing herself to. We have the privilege to be part of the bride of Christ, married to Him for all eternity. Will we pass our test as Ruth did? Do we see beyond the surface? Through any discouragement or darkness, are we beholding Him who is invisible? These are things we must answer individually. If they are settled before God, real marriage vows will flow from our hearts on the wedding day. They will be our vows, not someone else's. They will be filled with divine fragrance and grace to keep them, because they have originated in God. Let us not settle for anything less. May God be glorified through it all.

The Place of Witnesses

If marriage is only between one man and woman and it is God alone who pronounces a couple as married, what is the role of those who attend the wedding ceremony? Why are we even there? We do not ask these questions just to be foolish, but to suggest that in everything we do, we seek for understanding--answers from God that have meaning.

As a couple exchanges vows and commits to each other, although the vows are before God alone, performing vows before witnesses makes the time more meaningful and pointed. Jesus said, *"Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven."*

(Matthew 10:32) To stand openly before God and men seals those vows in our heart. We see an example of this when Boaz took Ruth to be his wife. He made the confession openly before witnesses. Is this not our proper place as brothers and sisters in the Lord? We do not come to marry a couple, but to witness their vows before God and to give them an opportunity to declare what is in their hearts to each other before God and man.

There are many cultural traditions surrounding weddings, but universally, a wedding is a time of rejoicing. When we are full of joy, we want others to enter into our joy with us. Witnesses come to participate in the joy of the bride and groom. It is their day, but we give them an opportunity to share their joy with us. In so doing, their joy is made richer, and God is glorified because He is the one bringing them together. We also have an opportunity to serve the couple as they begin their journey together. This serving can be expressed in practical ways such as gifts, as well as feasting and rejoicing in the goodness of God. Music and testimonies that glorify God also allow us to participate together in the joy of the occasion.

In our discussion, we are thinking primarily of a bride and groom who are our brother and sister in the Lord and with whom we have a real relationship. This is where our participation has the greatest meaning. Certainly this is not true of every wedding we attend. There are many other situations we may find ourselves in, and we must get God's mind about each one. God does not want us to identify with sin. If a couple is entering into sin (i.e., marrying into adultery by marrying a divorced person), we should not give witness to that union. Only the Holy Spirit can lead us in these things and give us the proper discernment as we keep ourselves in the love of God.

Traditions of Man

I would like to say a little about the traditions of man. Over the centuries, traditions have developed in different cultures, and because many (or most) of these traditions have their origin in man, they do not honor God and actually take away from the real meaning of the wedding.

May I encourage a couple seeking to honor God in their union to look at these traditions squarely and lay aside anything that brings the ceremony down to a natural, earthly level that does not honor God? Whatever is inconsistent with the nature of God and takes away from the example of Christ and His bride should be discarded. Is that too hard? Don't we want to know the real blessing of God in such a time? Do we want to give forth a clear testimony of the nature and character of God? I believe we do, so let us be guided by the Holy Spirit and not by the traditions of this world.

As I have already said, the traditions I am speaking about vary from culture to culture, so I will not be specific. Many take the opportunity to be foolish, reveal the flesh, make fun of intimate things, and embarrass the bride and groom. Men seem to think that on this day they have liberty to bring intimate things into the open and joke about them. Does this admonition of Paul apply? *"Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption."* (Ephesians 4:29-30)

My appeal is that in the entire occasion--before, during, and after the wedding--all things be done to the glory of God. This includes dress, conduct, speech, and music. Surely it is a joyous occasion, but we can still glorify God in all things. Whatever our part, may the Lord lead us. Remember that we do not need to please man. We only need to please God. It is God with whom we all have to do.

Not everybody at a wedding will know the Lord. It is usually a mixed multitude of believers, family, and unbelievers. It is a wonderful opportunity to declare the riches and love of God by what is said and done. Because of the symbolic parallels between the marriage relationship and our relationship to the Lord, there is a wealth of opportunity to proclaim the Lord in a proper way. If the gospel is proclaimed in word and deed, the Holy Spirit can apply it to hungry hearts and draw men to Jesus.

I am not necessarily speaking about preaching, although there may be a place for that. I am primarily talking about the conduct of the occasion and what is included or excluded. If we try to mix worldly tradition with the things of God, it will take away from the power of the witness. There are many passages of scripture related to weddings that God can use to help us in our thinking. Matthew 25:1-13, Matthew 22:1-14, and John 3:27-30 are just a few. Let the Lord lead us in these things.

The Originality of God

My final appeal to a couple approaching this special day is to be original in God. So many weddings are only patterned after a form that has no originality and no power of witness. I do not see any place in the scripture or in God indicating rules to follow, a prescribed order of service, or anybody to say we are right or wrong. What we do, we do before God. He delights in originality that springs forth spontaneously from our union with Him.

In one way, could not every wedding be different? Could not every vow be different? Why? Because each individual is different and God wants us to express our love to Him and to our mate out of who we are in Him. You can sense when this is true. When somebody is just copying a pattern, it leaves an emptiness. But when vows and the entire wedding come out of the love of God flowing in the heart, it lifts the entire time up into the heavenlies and you just want to bask in the presence of God together.

For this to happen, we must be led of the Spirit because He is the only one who can take us into this realm. It puts us on our knees before God, utterly dependent on God for the next step. I believe this is where God wants us to begin, continue and end. God wants to fill all in all, and certainly He wants to fill this occasion with His presence. He wants to declare His love at all times and in every place, and this one is especially dear to His heart.

Brothers and sisters, I do not pretend to have all the answers. My desire here has been to encourage a young couple planning to be married to rethink everything before God and let God lead them in this joyous occasion. May God show each one of us how to participate, and may God be glorified in all things. Unto Him be glory in the church, both now and forevermore. Amen!