

The Bride

The Lamb's Wife

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"Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife." (Rev. 21:9) Some of the sweetest teaching in the Bible concerns the bride of the Lamb. Jesus Christ is the Lamb, and His people will make up the bride. (John 1:29; II Cor. 11:2) The terms "bride" and "Lamb" are not intended to be taken literally. Jesus was not a tiny, silly, woolly lamb, led ignorantly and helplessly to the slaughter. The bride will not be one individual, a woman demurely arrayed in a white dress for her wedding. Neither will the marriage of the Lamb be a natural, literal marriage as we understand it. It will be spiritual, different and far better than what we know as marriage, but like marriage in certain ways. To discover what some of the likenesses are, we will go to Genesis, where God gave us a picture of His purpose for the first marriage.

"It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet," that is, a suitable helper, "for him." (Gen. 2:18) God said this so we would consider His reason for giving Adam a wife. After each step of creation the Bible says, "God saw that it was good." When He looked at man standing alone, He said, "It is not good." Man was to have dominion over the whole earth. It was not God's will for him to undertake this as a lonely task, but as a joyful one. Without a suitable helper, it was not possible for his joy to be full. Real joy is shared joy. Real sharing

involves sharing plans and responsibilities as well as possessions. It was necessary for Adam's companion to be able to partake fully in all his thoughts and labors, to see as he saw and feel as he felt, else there would not be true fellowship to make his life good. In all creation there was none qualified to fill that place. (Gen. 2:20) God made Eve to complete and share in the good purpose He had for Adam. This sharing in the working out of the Father's will is God's first and highest purpose for marriage.

Likewise, it is the Father's will for Christ to have dominion over all creation, visible and invisible, in heaven and earth. (Col. 1:16-18) He will not exercise His dominion in isolation. To make His joy full, there will be a sharing of His purposes and works with another. We are told that if we suffer with Christ, we will be joint heirs with Him, reigning with Him and sharing His glory. (Rom. 8:17; II Tim. 2:12) This is the place that is set before the child of God, pictured figuratively in "the bride, the Lamb's wife." Who else would share the throne of the great King? We are offered a place close to Jesus, completely and perfectly involved with all His spiritual desires. The Bible's teaching of the bride is aimed at those who are willing to satisfy and be satisfied by their Saviour.

Christ does not yet possess a bride. The picture God gives to us of our relationship with Christ during the Church age is this: "Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular." (I Cor. 12:27) Not until Revelation 19 do we read, "The marriage of the Lamb is come." These two figures, the body of Christ and the bride of the Lamb, speak of two different aspects of God's plan for us. To help us understand the differences between the two, we turn again to the example of Adam and Eve.

Was Adam's body the helper he needed? No, that would be a contradiction. A man who possesses only his own body is alone. Yet look at the part Adam's body had in bringing forth his companion. "And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought hereunto the man." (Gen. 2:21-22) Adam's bride was created from part of his own body. "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 shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh." (Gen. 2:23-24) These words which Adam spoke are referred to a number of times in the New Testament, leading us to realize that they were more than a statement of the obvious. They were a prophecy of something yet to come.

In I Corinthians 15:45, Christ is called "the last Adam." The Church as a whole is the spiritual body of this last Adam. (Eph. 1:22-23) Is the Church, His body, the bride foretold by the scripture? Or does He await something more, even as the first Adam did? Adam alone among all creation had to wait for his mate. Only Eve, out of all creation, was brought forth from the body of her spouse. This was not done without purpose and forethought on God's part; it was done so that we might learn from it. Where will the Lamb's wife come from? As the first Adam's wife came from a portion of his body which God slipped out from his side and fashioned into a new individual who was rejoined to Adam in marriage, so it will be with Christ and His bride.

In Ephesians, there is a passage which some find

hard to reconcile with this view of the bride. "As the Church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the Church, and gave himself for it; That he might present it to himself a glorious Church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing." (Eph. 5:24-25, 27) What confuses some is that those who will be presented to Christ are called "a glorious Church." After further instructions about marriage, Paul wrote, "This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the Church." (Eph. 5:32) Again, "the Church." If the whole Church is to be the bride, then the way God made Eve has no particular meaning, and the meaning of the bride becomes obscure. Yet no one can rightly deny what is written in God's word.

The antidote to confusion about the Bible is learning more about the Bible. The New Testament was written in Greek. The Greek word usually translated as "Church" is "ekklesia." Its literal meaning is a "called out" group, and the word existed long before it was applied to Christians. It can refer to any group of people who are called together for any purpose. In Acts 19, where it is translated "assembly," this word is used to refer to an unruly mob at Ephesus who protested violently against the preaching of the gospel. When the word refers to saved people, it is used far more frequently to speak of local churches than to speak of the whole body of Christ.

The meaning of a word is partly determined by its context. Idol worshippers rioting against the gospel at Ephesus were not Christians just because they were called an "ekklesia." The Church at Corinth was not the whole body of Christ just because it was called an

"ekklesia." Paul certainly spoke of saved people in Ephesians 5, but the mere use of this Greek word does not force us to believe he was referring to every saved person unless the context supports that thought. Paul indicated that what he was writing was "a great mystery." Mysteries demand careful consideration. A little thought tells us his real topic was not the proper conduct of a marriage, although he spoke to that issue. Further meditation, comparing scripture with scripture by the Spirit's help, will tell us that this particular "ekklesia" is not the whole body of Christ, although he spoke to all within the body who will listen.

What is the will of Christ for the Church today? "That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word." (Eph. 5:26) With this in mind, He gave Himself for us. It is a preparation for the bride. Christ has not by His own choice excluded anyone from entering into this working out of His will, but in practical terms, not many Christians want to do so. Are there many people like those at Berea who, when Paul preached things they had never heard, searched the scriptures daily to see if what he said was true? How many are willing to let go of their own ideas when the word of God teaches differently? If the Bible shows that the teachings of a popular religious leader are wrong, do his followers applaud or condemn those who stand by the Bible instead of the man? Provision is made for all, but a part of the great mystery is that comparatively few partake of it.

Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth, "Would to God ye could bear with me a little in my folly: and indeed bear with me. For I am jealous over you with a godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve

through his subtlety, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ." (II Cor. 11:1-3) Paul believed that his deep concern and solemn warnings about their spiritual condition would be viewed by the Corinthians as foolish. Theirs was a large and prosperous Church. The gifts of the Spirit were manifested among them. Outwardly, they had all the marks of spiritual success. Yet he was concerned, and could not keep silent about his fears for them. What did he think might happen?

Consider what took place after Satan had beguiled Eve, first into misinterpreting God's word, then into doubting it, and then into disobeying it. "They heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God." (Gen. 3:8) Here the figurative picture of Eve's relationship with Adam gives way to the reality of their relationship with the Lord. When Eve was beguiled away from simple trust, her relationship with God was damaged and permanently changed. Paul was concerned lest something like this should happen to the Corinthians.

He was not afraid they might lose eternal life. He wrote elsewhere, "The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Eternal condemnation is payment for sin. If we earn the right to possess eternal life, it is a payment rather than a gift. Gifts become the permanent possession of those who receive them; if the giver takes back the gift, then it was a loan, not a gift. Further, if the life God gave could ever perish, it would be semi-permanent, not eternal. No. Paul's concern was not for their salvation. They had believed on Jesus Christ and had received the gift of eternal life. That was settled.

On what aspect of their relationship with Christ was Paul's concern focused then? "I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear...." His fear for them concerned their espousal, their engagement to Christ. Marriage arrangements in that day were made through a go-between. God had given Paul such a place with the Corinthians. Paul told them about Jesus, showing them His spiritual wealth and eternal glory, inviting them to share it with Him. He had espoused them to Christ. If every child of God, secure in the promise of eternal life, is guaranteed a place in the called-out group referred to as "the bride," then Paul's godly jealousy, or zeal in this matter was as foolish as the Corinthians imagined. On the other hand, if his concern was not foolish, we too should be concerned lest we be found to have broken our espousals, lest we foolishly throw away the very best that God has offered to us.

Paul spoke of being "corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ." The word translated "simplicity" means "singleness." (See Eph. 6:5-6; Col. 3:22-23) Paul knew that while Christ is gracious and will in no wise cast out those who come to Him (John 6:37), neither will He enter into the highest and best spiritual union with those who are not committed to Him alone. If two people desire a lifelong relationship, they devote themselves and their marital love singly to one another. Nothing and no one is permitted to share the place which the marriage partner should have. If it is found before marriage that one of the two is given to divided love, or that other things will share a place of equal importance with the marriage, it is wisest to end the engagement. The Corinthians loved the Lord, but they were allowing other persons and other things to compete for their devotion.

This need for singleness of heart toward Jesus explains what Paul meant in writing, "What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ." (Ph'p. 3:7) Paul cleared from his heart those affections which might intrude on his relationship with Christ. So also are the following words explained. "Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ." (Ph'p. 3:8) To know the beloved One with an excellent knowledge was Paul's desire. Those whose hearts are drawn in love to possess such knowledge will win Christ, even as He has won their hearts. Those believers who care little about knowing all they can about Him will not win Him, even though the free gift of eternal life is fully secured by faith.

This "great mystery" concerning the bride was not revealed in ages past. It is a part of the revelation given to Paul for this age. It was hinted at and foreshadowed in such Old Testament passages as Psalm 45, Proverbs 31, and the Song of Solomon, but it was nowhere explained. It simply was not offered back then. Of the man who announced His coming and prepared the way before Him, Jesus said, "Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist." (Matt. 11:11) With a commendation like that from his Lord, I cannot believe John the Baptist received anything less than the best God offered, yet he said, "He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled." (John 3:29) While emphasizing to his disciples that he was not the Christ, he made it clear that he was also not of the bride. Did this great man know what he was talking about? I think so.

John expressed great satisfaction in the place God had given to him. It would be presumptuous to say that Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Rahab, David, Daniel, Anna, John the Baptist, or any other devoted saint from ages past will have a place less joyful and satisfying than the bride, but it would be unscriptural to say they will be a part of the bride. We have been espoused to Christ as unto one husband. They were called to the wedding feast. Faithful saints from other ages will be the friends of the bridegroom and companions of the bride. Read Psalm 45:14; Matthew 22:1-3, 25:1-13; and Luke 14:7-11. Revelation 19:9 says, "Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb." Theirs will be a good place, a place of great blessing, but not the place of the bride. The bride is not called with the guests to the marriage supper. As Paul said in Hebrews 11:40, God has "provided some better thing for us."

What kind of ending should be given to a Bible study such as this, dealing as it does with the deepest relationship which can grow up between us and Christ? Frankly, I am not sure. If your heart responds to the opportunity of knowing more of Him and of His love for you, and if your desire increases to lay hold on His purpose for you, you will realize that no pat answers or simplified advice can bring you to the highest glory with Him. His love for you, and your love for Him will assure the finishing of the work. If you are indifferent to the offer He has made, and if you refuse to accept that place which would most completely satisfy His heart and yours, then many words and tearful admonitions will not move you. He gave His all for you. There is no more persuasive argument than this.

Nevertheless, a closing word. Revelation 19:7 says, "Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to

Him : for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and His wife hath made herself ready." Who will be in that gathering of people, called out to delight the heart of Christ in eternal companionship? Those who have made themselves ready. The word of God is central to this preparing work. If you yield yourself to Christ, He will use His word to show you how to make ready. He will do this step by step, as you walk together with Him. No one else can do for you what He must do. No one but you can prevent Him from doing it.

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