

“THE Wedding Invitation”

Psalm 96:1-6, 10-13, Revelation 19:9, 11-16

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Jesus Christ is the ultimate ‘trophy’ relationship. Accepting his wedding invitation will bring the finest joy, justice, and jubilation we can possibly experience.



If we boil the Biblical story and the Christian account of God’s relationship with us down to four words, they would be CREATION, FALL, REDEMPTION, and RESTORATION. It’s my view that in the Reformed part of the Body of Christ, you will hear all kinds of sermons on the first three acts, but hardly any on Restoration.

So, as a college student, it took a while in my discipleship journey before I was confronted with this. The Triune God had created everything, and knew and loved me from before the beginning of time – check. Men and women had turned to their own way instead of God’s way, made a huge mess of their own lives and the entire planet was paying the penalty for our rebellion – check. But God had immediately set about a process of rescuing lost humanity through a set of covenants with Abraham and the nation of Israel, aimed at bringing not only them but people from every tribe and nation back to himself, ultimately through own Son, Jesus Christ, incarnated at Christmas, who taught the ways and the love of God in the flesh, was slain on a cross and yet risen again three days later for our redemption when we trust in Him – check. Finally, He is coming back, and could come back at any moment, to bring human history to an end and usher in the culmination of His reign – really?

I remember thinking very consciously at that point – Jesus, could you wait until I get married before you come back? Apparently I wasn’t the only one. A few years later I was at a huge conference of youth leaders, and the Skit Guys, a humorous duo, played a groom talking to his best man at the wedding reception,

when suddenly Jesus returns. The groom is shown looking over at his bride, then over at Jesus, over at his bride, over at Jesus. “Come on! Can’t you wait one more hour? Thirty minutes?”

It’s a very understandable feeling when we’re young. I want you to come back, Jesus. But not until the championship game. Not until my first child. Not until the Cubs win the world series (Oops!) At the very least, not until I’m married!

What scripture shows us, however, is Jesus is offering us the *ultimate* marriage, one that surpasses all others in security, joy, adventure, and expectation. Jesus’ return is compared to a wedding to end all weddings. We’re going to look at *the marriage, the bride, the groom, and the reception.*



The Marriage: covenant and surprise

Darrell Johnson, a pastor and professor at Regent in Vancouver, does a beautifully succinct job in describing first-century betrothals. First, the prospective groom would leave his father’s house and travel, accompanied by his best man, to the prospective bride’s house. There the groom would finalize arrangements with the bride’s father. In particular, they would settle on the “purchase price.” In some cultures, they would call this the “dowry.” You may recall Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:19, “Don’t you know your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit? You are not your own, for you were *bought with a price*. So glorify God in your body.” As soon as the groom paid the purchase price, the marriage technically went into effect. The man and woman were legally husband and wife, although they would not live together for some time. The bride was “consecrated” to the groom – “set apart” exclusively for him. This was sealed by drinking a cup of wine together, over which a betrothal benediction was pronounced: “This cup is a new covenant.”

Then the groom would leave the bride’s house and return to his father’s house. He would be away from her for about a year. During this time, he would prepare a room for the bride in his father’s house, and the bride would prepare herself for the wedding. At the end of the betrothal period, the groom would appear in his best clothes, accompanied by his best man and friends. While everyone had a rough idea of when the groom would come, they did not know the exact day or hour. Usually, to add to the element of surprise, he would arrive around midnight. His arrival would be preceded with the shout, “Here is the bridegroom! Come out.

Come out to meet him!” (Matt. 25:6) With great joy, the bride, veiled and accompanied by her maidens, who were carrying lamps would come out to join the groom and his attendants. Then the wedding feast would begin! Everyone would be dressed to the nines and this party would last seven, sometimes fourteen days!

This may help us understand what’s going on when Jesus is asked by Mary to turn water into wine at the wedding in Cana (John 2:1-11). Wine signifies the joy of the new relationship. A community celebration designed to last days where the wine runs out early is a social disaster and would be seen as a terrible start to a marriage. But when Mary says, “Son, they’ve run out of wine.” He replies, “Mom (literally) ‘woman’ don’t get me involved, my hour has not yet come.” In John, Jesus only uses the word “hour” to describe the hour of his death. What? Well, for Jesus, a single man in his thirties at a wedding feast, of COURSE he’s thinking about his own future wedding, which is going to be to US – and it will cost his blood to betroth us to him, which in spiritual terms is most precious wine of all. Betrothals, then and now, involve communities, covenant commitments, and sacrifice.

The Bride: Beauty below the surface

But let’s turn our attention to the bride for a moment. She has been making herself ready for this day as well. She is clothed in linen, bright and pure, and looks glorious. We’re told this dress is made from “the righteous deeds of the saints” (19:8) which Paul in Ephesians tells us Christ gives us the power to do (Eph. 5:25-27). It’s a mutual act of love. If you’ve ever read Revelation, you know the Bride is set against the symbol for Roman excess and cruelty, the prostitute called Babylon. In Revelation, there’s the vicious dragon, symbolic of the state’s power to intimidate through violent persecution and even martyrdom. But then there is also Babylon’s seductive, intoxicating idolatry built on adulterous compromise. A first century Roman poet, Juvenal, wrote “*Luxury is more ruthless than war.*” In other words, we can be led astray by the trinkets and trappings of success in this life, and find that we’ve fallen into the vicious and careless arms of Babylon.

Men, if I need to bring you back for a moment, compare the choices of how you will spend your time, money, and affection. In Western Pennsylvania, I could say, “are you following Johnny Unitas? Or Johnny Manziel?” They would immediately know what I was talking about. True quality is more than skin deep.

A movie scene that I simply cannot remember the source of – perhaps Steel Magnolias or Driving Miss Daisy – has a wealthy older woman describing a

schooling lesson given from her mammy when she was a little girl. “She told me, ‘Draw a picture of your pretty house. Now put a white picket fence all around it. Don’t forget the trees and the clothes lines, and the cat in the yard. Put in the big picture windows. Now draw flames coming out of it because it’s all going to burn.’”

What in the world was she talking about? Again, if you read Revelation, you find that Babylon’s wealth is built on idolatry, on tyranny and deception. All of the apparent glory of the empire in a single hour is laid waste (chapter 18). Egypt, Assyria, Greece, Rome. Genghis Khan. The Ottoman Empire. The Third Reich. The Soviet Union. All of these empires- past, present, and future - that build affluent and selfish lifestyles apart from God’s way are shaken to the point of collapse and destruction. The Bride of Christ has suffered, and experienced apparent poverty by trusting the promise of her Bridegroom and his upside-down Kingdom. But as He arrives to meet His bride, she the church – WE the church – prepare to celebrate.

Before we leave this point, however, let’s mark well what scripture is saying about sin. Sin isn’t a spiritual parking ticket, or a little too much dessert after a nice meal. Sin is adultery. It is a betrayal of our love, and profoundly hurtful act. It’s saying we can be engaged to two fiancés at once, that the blood shed, the life given up on our behalf is a laughable, somewhat provincial gift, and we’re trading it for the latest trending fashion to come across our phone. I’ve seen it happen to friends, parishioners, fellow pastors. It seems so exciting and exotic for a moment, maybe awhile. But it leads to a “mouthful of gravel” (Prov. 20:17).

Yet it’s ultimately fruitless to focus on the seductions we’re to avoid. The Bible gives us a better strategy, as we turn to . . .

The Groom: The ‘Trophy’ Husband

My daughter in her teen years, thrilled to rattle my cage, especially at the dinner table.

One night, she declared, “Dad, I finally figured out what I want to be when I grow up!”

“That’s wonderful honey. What’s that?”

“A trophy wife!”

The best way to appreciate what we have in Christ, and the worth of following the narrow road (Matt. 7:13), is to *behold* the ‘trophy’ groom (Rev.

19:11)! Look at him! “Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary” (Ps. 96:6). Let’s simply gaze at some of the qualities described of Jesus here.

He is just. Jesus came into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday on a donkey, an animal that princes of the royal family would ride to show that they were coming in peace. A white horse, however, shows a king coming for war. The very name of the rider is Faithful and True. Every promise Jesus makes to the Father, every promise that Jesus makes to US, he has and he will fulfill. His word is his bond. He can be counted on, for he is the very definition of Goodness and Truth. This is particularly important because of his next quality.

He sees – and loves you. Christ has eyes that are like “flames of fire.” When the heavenly Bridegroom looks at you, he sees the truth of who you are, your strengths and weaknesses, your public failures and your private sorrows. He sees you all the way to the bottom of your soul, and loves you still. We know he loves you because the robe he’s wearing has been dipped in blood – that’s his own blood – in order to go before you into battle. More on that in a moment.

He is interesting. Notice in addition to his crowns – victories over sin, death, and hell, among other things, Jesus “has a name written that no one knows but himself.” Jesus loves to give nicknames, even new names to his people. Jacob becomes Israel. Simon becomes Peter. Saul becomes Paul. In Revelation 2:17, Jesus gives to the faithful believers in Pergamum “a white stone, with a new name written on it that no one knows except the one who receives it.” People who love each other give pet names to each other, some humorous, some tender, depending on the nature of the relationship. We have dozens of names given to us of who Jesus Christ is through the scriptures: Wonderful Counselor. Good Shepherd. Bread of Life. Bright Morning Star. But here we’re told there’s a name that isn’t going to be shared. There’s always more to the Triune God to be learned, discovered, and experienced, and that will be true all through eternity. We can’t fully comprehend him, but all of the thousands and millions of facets of his character that we do discover are increasingly wonderful.

He invites us to adventure. Our arriving Bridegroom is dressed in a robe, the sign of a priest, and calls us to ride with him, as part of the “armies of heaven” (19:14). Jesus calls us to participate with him in the adventure of redemption, as the Church Militant and Triumphant. “No longer do I call you servants, but friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15).

Don't trade a bit role in a war for a leading role in a cage. Yet we find that here, we're not dressed as soldiers in this army, but as priests ourselves. The "battle" Jesus is riding to has already been won on the cross. He is simply coming now to round up the outlaws.

The Reception: Eat or be Eaten

I'm going to risk a little here with good taste in the name of effective biblical teaching. At a well-to-do church in a previous call Kristina and I taught through the book of Revelation to the High School class. Part of the incentive to get 15-17 year olds out of bed early on Sunday was that they knew a couple dozen fresh donuts would be waiting for them.

When we got to Revelation chapter 19, I came *this* close to buying two dozen jelly filled donuts, putting edible googly eyes on them, and putting frosting on them to look like generals, kings, and other politicians, ready to be devoured by the hungry birds. I didn't ultimately do it because I like being employed as much as the next pastor. But it would have made an indelible impression. There are two suppers at the end of time – we can either eat or be eaten. We can either accept the wedding invitation of the lamb and celebrate, or chase after the invitation of the beast and, well, accept our just desserts.

Let's focus one more time on the bride and bridegroom. In "Lyrics for His Life," we've looked at the Psalms and how they could be used in Jesus' life. At the Last Supper, the Seder meal shared with his disciples, we know that Jesus would



have sung Psalms 113-118 over the course of the meal. There are the "Hallel" Psalms, sung to celebrate God delivering Israel from captivity in Egypt. "The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation" (118:14). The very last verse of Psalm 150 ends with "Hallelujah, Yah."

Do you know that the only place in the entire New Testament where the word "Hallelujah" is used is at the wedding reception of God in Revelation 19? Deliverance has come, not just from Egypt, not just from injustice on earth.

Deliverance has come from sin, death, and hell, not just for a night or a year, but for all eternity!

Let me close with a few applications for us.

First, if you're young, or worried that you're going to miss out on something this world is promising, even very good things – let me offer this. Earthly weddings can be, in fact, incredibly joyful affairs. There have been three days in my life where at the end of the day, my smile muscles hurt: my own wedding, and the two weddings of my children. There were people from every portion of my life, from all over the country, that gathered to share our joy. But that AUTHOR of that joy is the one who is coming to take us to Himself, and the joy that we will experience, not just when he comes, but in ever increasing measure through all of eternity – He can be trusted – absolutely – to give you the deepest needs and desires of your heart when he returns.

When I was in college, there was a frat house close to my dorm that threw a “Heaven and Hell” party. If you wanted to dance, you went up to the third floor, where they opened the windows – because I guess heaven is cold and windy. But the CROWD went to the basement, because that's where the action was. Better drinks? Who knows. But the truth of the matter is, HEAVEN is where to be. Your fulfilment and destiny for who you've been created to be are there.

Or, perhaps you've experienced a deep heartbreak or injustice or grief in your life. Something precious was snatched from you, and you've been haunted by that loss every since. Your only release is when you sleep, which is difficult to come by, and when you wake, it feels like the nightmare is beginning all over again. It's beyond belief. I want to encourage you. The Bridegroom is coming. And when He comes, justice comes in his train. Death is swallowed up in victory. Every tear will be wiped away, for sorrow and death will be no more. And for those of us



that have experienced the deepest valleys of sorrow on earth, the consolations of heaven will bring the sweetest taste of all.

Perhaps C.S. Lewis at the end of the Chronicles of Narnia gives us the best way to consider what is coming:

And now the things that began to happen were so great and beautiful that I cannot

write them. And for us this the end of all stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.

Come, Lord Jesus!