

JESUS CHRIST AND HIS BRIDE

The world of the Bible is distant for most of us in terms of culture and time. It's a very different world compared to the world in which we live.

Most people in our western nations learn in the Greek way; that is, truth is described in words and careful definitions and explanations. We love our bullet lists and dot points. Someone from the Middle East, is more likely to describe truth in terms of pictures and metaphors and since the Bible was written in the Middle East it is written in such a way.

A westerner, for example might describe God as powerful or loving or all-knowing. An easterner, on the other hand, would be much more likely to say God is my shepherd or God is my rock or living water. By understanding the culture of the land of the Bible we can better understand the pictures and the metaphors and the lessons that it has to teach us.

Today in the sermon I'd like to look at one such metaphor or picture that is used to teach certain lessons in the Bible. Today I'd like to share with you some of the bridal customs of the Middle East in Bible times and show the lessons Christ taught based on the picture and metaphor of a Jewish wedding.

The analogy of a wedding and a marriage is used right throughout the Bible. Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary has this to say about this analogy or metaphor:

"In the Old Testament, the word 'marriage' is used to describe God's spiritual relationship with his chosen people, Israel (**Psalm 45; Isaiah 54:6**). When God's people fell into sin, especially idolatry, the sin was likened to adultery on the part of a wife (**Jeremiah 3:1-20**).

"In the New Testament, the analogy is continued: Christ is the Bridegroom (**John 3:29**), and the church is His bride (**Ephesians 5:25-33; Revelation 21:2**). The apostle Paul counsels husbands and wives to imitate the spiritual closeness and love that Christ has for His bride, the church (**Ephesians 5:22-33**)."

With that as background I'd like to share with you some fascinating information that comes from a six-part DVD series put out by Focus on the Family called "Faith Lessons on the Life and Ministry of the Messiah" that was all shot on location in Israel where the tour guide Ray Vander Laan presents lessons at different locations to his tour group.

One of the lessons is at the ruins of a housing complex in Chorazin, which is a few miles NW of Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee. I had the opportunity to visit the ancient synagogue there a few years back where archaeologists found the only example of a Moses seat on which the person assigned to read from the Torah scroll read from.

The Jewish housing complex where this lesson is filmed is called an insula. Essentially it is group of houses or, more accurately, a group of units built around a central courtyard. What would happen when a man married a girl generally they wouldn't go off to some different location from their parents. They would build another house attached to the house of the man's parents.

A man would pick out a bride. He would then negotiate a bride price with the bride's father. This is what we would call a dowry which was given to the bride and her family. This custom became terribly corrupted in the days of Jane Austen and her novels such as *Pride and Prejudice* where it was the woman who gave a dowry to the man.

In Israel after they negotiated a bride price they would exchange a glass of wine to seal the deal and then the man would go to His father's place and build a new house or unit next to his father's place. This might take many months. The bride would have no idea how long it would take or when the bridegroom would come back for her.

Once the brideprice was negotiated this betrothal included a binding marriage contract known as a kettubah. It was much more binding than modern-day engagements and it could only be broken by a legal divorce. It was during this betrothal period that Mary became pregnant and Jesus was begotten by the Holy Spirit.

The groom would normally be anxious to go back to his bride. He might ask his father if he could go to her and the father might say, "Not until you've finished the house. You can't bring her back to a half-built house." Over in **Matthew 24:36** we read: "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

This verse comes across as rather strange to most of us saying that the Father knows something that Jesus Christ doesn't know. What we need to understand is that this is a Hebrew idiom. When a groom was asked when the marriage was he'd often say "No one knows the day or hour except only my father."

It won't be until the Father says it's time that Jesus will be able to come back and marry His bride, the Church. The term "No man knows the day or the hour" is also a Hebrew idiom for the Feast of Trumpets hearkening back to the time that the announcing of the new moon in the month of Tishri was done by observation rather than by calculation.

Now after the groom had finished his new house and raised the money as set out in the marriage contract a date was set to consummate the marriage at the bride's home. The bride waits with her maidens, for the arrival of the groom and his companions. They would blow the shophar and a messenger would announce it was time for the wedding. This is what is being described in the parable of the ten virgins over in **Matthew 25**:

"Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Now five of them were wise, and five *were* foolish. Those who *were* foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight a cry was *heard*: 'Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!' Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us *some* of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise answered, saying, '*No*, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.' And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open to us!' But he answered and said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming" (**verses 1-13**).

The Pillar New Testament Commentary says the following about this parable: "The bridegroom and his party made their way to the home of the bride...When the two groups came together the wedding took place. After this there was a procession, generally to the home of the bridegroom, where feasting took place that might go on for days. The processions often took place at night, when torches made for a spectacular display. Clearly this is presupposed in Jesus' parable. The ten girls were involved in going out to meet the bridegroom, which makes it appear that they belonged to the bride's party."

We don't know when Christ will return and we should live our lives and be ready as if He is coming very quickly. We are to be regularly seeking and using the oil of God's Holy Spirit. We don't want to be like the foolish virgins without any of the Holy Spirit when Christ comes and be shut out and miss out on the Wedding Supper altogether.

When the bridegroom would come for his bride, the bride and groom would go into a room called a chuppah. They would shut the door and they would consummate the wedding. The best man would stand at the door listening for certain sounds to know when it had been consummated and then the best man would announce them as husband and wife.

John the Baptist spoke of this saying that he was the friend who stands at the door and has the privilege of hearing Christ's voice. Let's go over to **John 3** and read what John the Baptist says in **verses 28-30**:

"You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent before Him.' He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. He must increase, but I *must* decrease."

John the Baptist's great example to us of humility and willingness to play second fiddle to Christ comes through loud and clear in this analogy that he uses of being the best man who's not the one on centre stage but is just as joyful for his dear friend who's getting married.

After consummation, the groom took the bloodied bed sheet and gave it to the witnesses and the father of the bride. It was kept as proof if the husband ever accused the bride of not being a virgin on their wedding night. Today's young women have no idea how highly past cultures and God values virginity! Christ cleanses us of our spiritual immorality and allows us to become spiritual virgins through His blood.

Jesus has paid the brideprice to win our hearts - His very own life to pay for our sins. We read of this over in **1 Corinthians 6:19-20**: "Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit *who is* in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price." Jesus has effectively said to each of us "I love you. I have engaged myself to you and paid the bridal price for you." Once a man and woman were pronounced husband and wife they would share a glass of wine as an expression of their commitment to one another just as we do at the Passover.

There were three stages of a Jewish wedding - 1) The Contract when they were betrothed 2) The Consummation when the couple would have intercourse and 3) The Celebration which would last many days.

When Jesus Christ returns there will be the great Wedding feast of the Lamb and His bride, the church. We read about that over in **Revelation 19:7-9**:

"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!'"

Just as a bride spends a great amount of time and effort making herself look as beautiful and spotless as possible we also need to put in the same amount of effort to be as spotless and beautiful spiritually at Christ's return.

On his last night before He was crucified Jesus told His disciples in **John 14:2-3**: "In My Father's house are many mansions; if *it were* not so, I would have told you. 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."

Many mainstream christians use this verse to support their belief in the rapture but this verse has nothing to do with the rapture. Here Jesus is drawing an analogy from the bridal imagery we've already looked at. He tells us that in His Father's house there are many rooms. He has a big insula. One day we'll be all together with Christ and the Father in the courtyard of His insula - the New Jerusalem. **Revelation 21:3** says: "Behold, the tabernacle of God *is* with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them *and be* their God."

In his article "Your First Day in the Kingdom" author Steve Collins says the following about the joy of the wedding supper of the Lamb:

"There had been the Wedding Supper of the Lamb (**Revelation 19:6-9**) in which Christ fulfilled the words of **Matthew 26:29**, and once again drank wine with His disciples and brethren...The banquet had been awesome, and you had previously had no idea that anything could possibly taste or smell so good. The joy of sharing it with so many old friends, and also with so many new ones from all ages of mankind's history was beyond words!

"Now you understand what life is REALLY supposed to be like. Human life was so limited compared to what you now experience that you marvel you were ever so limited and frail. You now comprehend what Christ said in **Matthew 19:17** when he said, 'If you will enter into life, keep the commandments'.

"All the above experiences were wonderful, but the experience which overwhelmed all others in scope and majesty was the coronation ceremony of the saints which was foretold in **2 Timothy 4:8** and **Revelation 20:4**. As each of God's new sons come forth, their works and sufferings for the purpose of Christ were proclaimed to the entire assemblage as trumpets sounded fanfares and voices of angels shouted as each new Son of God was crowned.

"Finally, it is your turn, A hush falls over the assembly, and Christ Himself is calling you to the very throne of God! Christ then turns to you and you are given a white stone with a new name written on it which no one knows, except you and Jesus Christ (**Revelation 2:17**), symbolising the unique and special relationship you will have with your Saviour for all eternity! Other names are given to you (**Revelation 3:12**) by which you will be known to the rest of the family of God.

"You rise a crowned Son of God, and with the shouts of joy and welcoming ringing in your ears, you return to your position to witness the remainder of the ceremony, knowing that each other individual is experiencing the same kind of personal feelings about their crowning as you did. It has been so indescribably wonderful...The rest of eternity is still before you and things can only get better!!!"

And just like in all the great fairy tales, Jesus Christ and His bride, the Church, will then live happily ever after!