

## “Jesus Gets Married”

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Eleventh in a series on Ephesians<sup>1</sup>

Ephesians 5.18b, 21-33

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Be filled with the Spirit like this . . . be subject to each other, out of reverence for the Messiah; wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as the Messiah is the head of the church his body, and is himself its Saviour. Just as the church is subject to the Messiah, so also wives should be subject in everything to their husbands.

Husbands, you must love your wives, just as the Messiah loved the church, and gave himself up for it, so that he might make it pure, cleansing it by washing it with water, through the word. He did this so that he could present the church to himself in brilliant splendour, without spot or blemish or any such thing, so that it would be holy and without blame. That's how husbands should love their wives, just as they love their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. Of course! No one ever hates his own flesh. He feeds it and cares for it, just as the Messiah does the church, because we are parts of his body.

It says in Scripture, "That's why a man leaves his father and mother and holds fast to his wife, and the two become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to the Messiah and the church. Anyway, each of you must love your wife as you love yourself, and the wife must see that she has reverence for her husband.

Ephesians 5.18b, 21-33

We started looking at this passage last week. If you are interested, some copies of my reflection are at the back. It's also on our church's website.<sup>2</sup> Briefly, when we imagine how folks heard this in the 1<sup>st</sup> century when Paul wrote it, we see how radically challenging it was . . . for husbands! They were the one's in charge, the heads of their families to whom their wives submitted. When we belong to Jesus, though, we all must submit to one another – wives to husbands *and* husbands to wives. When Jesus is our model, we realize authority is all about self-sacrifice, giving to others, serving others. So I am challenged by this direction Paul starts us in.

Paul also uses this husband-wife stuff to talk about the relationship between Jesus and his church. When I say “church,” I am not talking about some large, bureaucratic institution. (Although being somewhat organized helps.) Nor a building, any more than a house is the

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<sup>1</sup> This is also part of a periodic series I'm doing, *Calling Ourselves Names*. It focuses on the different way the Bible describes the Jesus-community. The others (so far) are “Sharing Life” (October 21, 2012) and “A Public Display” (October 20, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> <http://elorauc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/2014-03-16-Walking-in-Marriage.pdf>

same as the family who lives in it. (Although having somewhere for the church to gather is good.) The church is us, whom God gathers here. The church is other followers of Jesus whom the Spirit gathers in other places. The church is those whom the Messiah has claimed and called, to be part of him: to share in his life, his life for the world, his mission to bring life everywhere, to everyone.

To talk about Jesus and his church, I'm going to talk about weddings.

## II

Big, fat, Greek weddings!<sup>3</sup> Ephesus, where Paul sent this letter, was a Greek city. So what was a wedding like back then? Here's what I discovered.<sup>4</sup>

Before the big day, the bride offered sacrifices. To the god Artemis, who protected young maidens, she offered her childhood clothes and toys, signs of the life she was leaving behind. She sacrificed to Aphrodite, the god of sexuality and fertility, the new world she was entering.

Her wedding day began with a special bath. Her friends brought water from a river or spring in a special vessel. This gave her purity and fruitfulness.

They then dressed her, with high-quality purple cloth, a crown, and a veil. They made her look enticing, with a veiled, mysterious hotness!

Then, bride and groom and their guests feasted. Music and dancing followed. Men and women kept separate, though in view of each other.

As night fell, the bride's father presented her to her new husband. The groom took her hand, and gave her a gift, showing he accepted her. She lifted her veil, showing she accepted him.

Everyone then spilled into the streets, processing the couple to their home. The bride's and groom's mothers led the way, carrying torches lit from each of their family hearths. Singing

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<sup>3</sup> "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" was a film in 2002. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/My\\_Big\\_Fat\\_Greek\\_Wedding](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/My_Big_Fat_Greek_Wedding)

<sup>4</sup> For ancient Greek weddings, my main sources were two websites: "Ancient Greek Weddings" by Jennifer Goodall Powers of the State University of New York (Albany, 1997): <http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/consortium/ancientweddings3.html> "Women in Ancient Greece" course website by Marilyn A. Katz of Wesleyan University (Middletown, CT, 2000). One page (<http://mkatz.web.wesleyan.edu/cciv110x/sappho/cciv110.back.alcsapph.html>) includes links to wedding tradition materials prepared by a student of Professor Katz's, Mary Liz Williamson.

abounded.

Upon arrival, the couple went into the bridal chamber, and closed the door. Guests stayed outside, keeping guard. They banged on the door to drive away evil spirits. And sang songs. Naughty songs!

### III

So we have a mutli-stage celebration:

- 1) Sacrifices, to smooth the transition from her old life to new.
- 2) Bathing the bride, for purity and fertility.
- 3) Dressing the bride, for beauty.
- 4) Feasting.
- 5) Presenting the bride, by her father to the groom.
- 6) Processing the couple to their new home.
- 7) Beginning their new life together.

Keep this in mind as you hear again from today's reading. Marriage is a metaphor, a way of talking about the relationship between Jesus and his community. Ask this question: who is Jesus in this wedding drama?

*Husbands, you must love your wives, just as the Messiah loved the church, and gave himself up for her, so that he might make her pure, cleansing her by washing her with water, through the word. He did this so that he could present the church to himself in brilliant splendour, without spot or blemish or any such thing, so that she would be holy and without blame. . . .*

### IV

Who is Jesus here? What role is he playing in this wedding drama?

The groom, right. Paul compares Jesus to husbands. It fits. The Bible describes God as Israel's husband.<sup>5</sup> Jesus took this idea of God as a husband to talk about himself as a husband.<sup>6</sup> (That's bold!) Some of his earliest followers did the same.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus is the groom and the church, his community of people, we are his bride.

However, he is a strange groom.

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<sup>5</sup> See especially Isaiah 54.5-8; Jeremiah 2.1-3; Ezekiel 16.8-13; Hosea 1-3.

<sup>6</sup> See Matthew 25.1-13; Mark 2.18-20 (paralleled in Matthew 9.15 and Luke 5.34-35), John 3.29

<sup>7</sup> See Revelation 19.7 and 21.9.

When I work with engaged couples, we talk about the stress of wedding preparations. The bride is going nuts with planning, and details, and people meddling. The groom . . . is doing nothing! She is not happy about that! *“Doesn’t he care?”*

After listening carefully, I gently turn to the groom, and say something like this:

*You were probably like me. When you were a teenage guy, you’d sit around with your buddies, and talk about your wedding day. What you’d wear. What colour scheme you’d have. What kind of place you’d get married in. Stuff like that.*<sup>8</sup>

He’d be looking at me. *“What are you saying? Of course not!”* Guys have little experience thinking about weddings. They’ve wandered into a strange land, with unknown dangers, and they are lost. I remember dress shopping with Barb, our moms and her bridesmaids. I kept so quiet. So we talk about how he can be involved. And how she can let him be involved. (Though, I doubt much changes.)

But this groom Jesus, he gets so involved in his wedding day. He does everything!

He is the bride’s friend, bathing her *“so that he might make her pure, cleansing her by washing her with water, through the word.”*

He dresses her *“in brilliant splendour, without spot or blemish or any such thing, so that she would be holy and without blame.”*

Then, Jesus becomes the bride’s father, so he can *“present the church to himself.”*

Jesus is our Groom. We are his Bride. This speaks to how close and intimate this relationship is between the church community and our Divine Lover.

But he does everything else too. He gets us ready. He brings us together. He presents us to himself. Jesus tends to every detail of his wedding day.

Because he loves his church.

V

Church? Really? Not wanting to speak badly of the bride on her big day . . . but couldn’t Jesus do better?

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<sup>8</sup> I got this idea from a sermon I saw T. D. Jakes preach on television.

Christian community? A mess. Not much to look at. We let ourselves go. Often, we don't even have "a nice personality." Whoever marries us is not going to get so much of the "for better," and lots of the "for worse"; very little of "for richer" and a lot of "for poorer"; a bit of health, but mostly sickness.

Church community? You've heard our reputation. Based on our past history, we are not such a good bet to stay faithful.

Jesus knows all that. He knows how we are together. He knows our history. He knows us, better than we know ourselves.

He chooses us. He courts us. He weds us. Jesus gives his church its beauty. We are "*ragged and tattered, stained and ugly,*" and in many places, "*despised and persecuted.*"<sup>9</sup> Jesus cleanses us. He dresses us in the finest clothes and crown. Not to cover up who we are, but to reveal our true splendour.

We are the bride of the Messiah. He brings us to himself, presents us, and lifts our veil. Before everyone, he binds himself to us. We bring our "for worse," and he gives us his best. We bring our poverty, and he gives us his riches. We are sick. Jesus makes us well.

## VI

One more thing. When is the wedding day?

You know the vows, ". . . *til death do us part.*" Jesus says, "*with my death, I thee wed.*" "*The Messiah loved the church and gave himself up for it.*" He is the sacrifice offered at the start of the marriage.

Jesus gives everything for his Beloved.

Husbands, love your wives as the Messiah loves his church.

All of us, the Bride of Christ.

Praise be to God! Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> John R. W. Stott, The Message of Ephesians (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 228.