

The Church is a Bride

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[0 : 00] Well, tonight we are continuing a short study that we've been working through over the past four or five Sundays, the title of which is The Church in Pictures, and we've been looking at five different images that the New Testament gives us for the church.

These are the church as a pillar, the church as a farm, the church as a body, the church as a mother, and then finally tonight, the church as a bride.

All of these images help us understand the nature, functioning, and priorities of the church, and that's a crucial topic to think about. Those of you who are here when we started this series five weeks ago might remember that we said that throughout her history, the Christian church has been greatly harmed by two things.

The church has been misunderstood by people outside of her, and at the same time the church has been misrepresented by the people within her.

And for both of these reasons, whoever we are and whether we're a Christian or not, or whether we're not sure, it's immensely important to have a clear biblical understanding of what the church is and of what God wants the church to do.

[1 : 20] As I said tonight, we have come to the final part of this study. We're going to look at the image of the church as a bride.

Like all of the other images, this picture is telling us something important about the church. For those of you who weren't here, we can recap very briefly that the pillar shows us the church's grounding.

The church simultaneously stands on the truth in Jesus and holds up that truth for the world to see.

The farm shows us the church's duty. We're here to sow the seed of the gospel, to help disciples grow and to go out and bring in the harvest that's all around us.

The body shows us the church's workings. It functions like a body, many different parts, all working together. The mother image shows us the church's character, the key mindset of the church should be that of a devoted, caring mother.

Finally, the bride image shows us the church's destiny. Let's turn again to Ephesians 5.

[2 : 32] Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

The image of God's people as a bride is one that runs right through the whole Bible. So you go back to the Old Testament, you see this image foreshadowed in the people of Israel. They were called to be God's bride, and yet despite that precious value that they had, they tragically turned out to be an unfaithful and adulterous bride.

The image is revealed more clearly in the New Testament. The bridegroom, Jesus has come, and the church has been called to be his bride. But the ultimate fulfillment of this lies in the future.

The church as bride is an eschatological reality, something that belongs to the end times. God has an ultimate destiny for the church.

We see that in the last couple of chapters of Revelation where we have that glorious description of the marriage supper of the Lamb. And I think there's maybe a sense in which the whole Bible can be summed up as a moving, heartbreaking, and ultimately beautiful story of the love of God for his bride.

[4 : 05] So I want us to look at that together tonight, and I want us to focus in particular on what the bridegroom does for his bride. And we're going to look briefly at five things.

Number one, we're going to say that the bridegroom clings to his bride. Verse 31, before you there, repeats the great marriage mandate of Genesis 2.

These words express just the simple beauty of the marriage union. A man leaves his parents and holds fast to his wife, and the two become one.

And then after that, Paul, as he so often does, just throws in a wee statement that contains an astounding truth. This union of bridegroom and bride is exactly what happens in the relationship between Christ and the church.

All of this is pointing us to the doctrine that really is the overarching truth of Christian salvation. If you think of all the doctrines, all the teachings, when we talk about doctrines, we're just talking about different areas of teaching.

[5 : 14] If you think of all the doctrines of the Christian theology of salvation, you think of words like justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, all these things you read about or see mentioned in Scripture or read in theology.

If you see all these doctrines that ask, which is the most important? I think that the answer to that question is that the most important of all these doctrines is the doctrine of union with Christ.

And the reason for that is because all the other things, justification, adoption, and sanctification are an outworking of the fact that if you are a Christian or if you become one, you are united to Jesus by faith.

And that's the reason I think quite Paul's favorite way to describe a Christian is to say that we are in Christ. We are joined to him. The church is united to Jesus, just like a husband is united to his wife. That means, just in very simple terms, that all the benefits, resources, achievements and status of Jesus are now shared with us as his people.

[6 : 30] So when Yuna was united to me in marriage, she gained a rightful share to my collection of mixed tapes that I had in the car.

Now, you have to be under the age of 33 to know what that is, I think. But believe me, that was good. When you are united to Jesus by faith, you are given a right to share in his righteousness, his presence, his brotherhood, his grace, his love.

As bright the church is united to Jesus. But that union has an immensely important implication. It speaks of Christ's utterly unflinching faithfulness to his bride.

That's what the biblical ideal of marriage is, a relationship of absolute faithfulness. That's what marriage should be. Often it's not like that, and it's incredibly tough for people who have to go through that.

But although we can look at marriage in the world, maybe even our own relationships, and we can see failure, when we look at Jesus, we see that he never, ever fails.

[7 : 42] His faithfulness to his bride is absolute. That means that Jesus will never go cold on you.

Jesus will never have his head turned. Jesus will never let you down. Jesus will never, ever break your heart.

Instead, he is the most faithful bridegroom. He's committed, he's loyal, he's determined, he's dependable. Because in Jesus' eyes, you are impossible to walk away from.

But what makes that faithfulness even more astonishing is the fact that even though the bridegroom is the pinnacle of faithfulness, the bride is the complete opposite.

The love story of the Bible is not kind of a Hollywood romance where the perfect guy sees the perfect girl and they sort of swan into this perfect relationship that lives happily ever after.

[8 : 49] It's not like that at all. The love story of the Bible is of a perfect bridegroom who is repeatedly betrayed by his unfaithful bride.

And that truth is emphasized powerfully, particularly in the Old Testament, especially in the prophets. You'll remember that the prophets are like warning men. That's their role to send a message of warning to people.

And that usually means that when the prophets speak, it's because things are going wrong and the people are turning away from God. So you look at prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Hosea, they all describe God's people, Israel, as an unfaithful wife.

And sometimes it's in the most shocking of terms. But the imagery accurately reflected the situation. Israel was meant to be faithful to God, and yet they continually turned away from him and wondered after other gods instead.

And in the midst of all that betrayal and unfaithfulness and failure, you would think that God would have said, it's over. We are finished.

[10:03] And yet the astounding thing is that God does the very opposite. And that truth is captured very powerfully in an astonishing verse in Hosea.

Now, those of you who will know Hosea will know that Hosea as a prophet spoke about Israel's unfaithfulness. But that message was reinforced by the fact that Hosea's own wife cheated on him and he was betrayed by her.

All of that pointing towards the fact that Israel, as God's people, had betrayed him and had been unfaithful to him. They had provoked God and had given God every reason to turn away, and yet he says of Israel, how can I give up on you?

Ephraim is another name for the nation of Israel, particularly the northern kingdom, which Hosea prophesied to you. How can I give up on you? Oh Ephraim.

How can I hand you over to Israel? How can I make you like Adma? How can I teach you like Zebojim? Adma and Zebojim were cities that were destroyed earlier in Old Testament history.

[11:13] My heart recoils within me. My compassion grows warm and tender. Despite the fact that his bride was in a mess, God never gave up on her.

And the same is true of us. Even though we are broken, even though we failed, even though God could find a thousand reasons to dump us, he never will.

Instead, he clings to us. As Paul says, he holds fast to his wife.

Now isn't that incredible? I look at myself and I think God must want to push me away. Maybe you feel the same. You look at how you've mucked up and you think God would want to keep me at arm's length.

It's not true. The truth is, God wants to cling to you. He wants to hold you fast and he will never let you go.

[12:22] And the practical consequence of that for us is that in terms of our religious devotion, we are spoken for. So when you struggle with doubts in your faith, remember that you're spoken for.

Your bridegroom is holding you fast. When social pressure from colleagues or friends or culture is calling you to compromise, remember that you are spoken for. When Satan dangles something in front of you that's attractive but wrong, remember that you're spoken for.

And when feelings of low self-esteem leave your hopes and your assurance hanging by a thread, remember that it's a theological fact that you are spoken for.

If you are trusting in Jesus, you are His and He is never letting go because the bridegroom clings to His bride.

Secondly, the bridegroom delights in His bride. That's beautifully described for us in Isaiah 62. You shall no longer be termed forsaken, your land shall no more or be termed desolate.

[13:28] But you shall be called, my delight is in her and your land married for the Lord delights in you and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your sons marry you and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

This is reminding us of the fact that Jesus delights in the church as His bride. It's a great reminder that He is not a bridegroom who is being forced.

He's a bridegroom who is delighted. And there are many reasons for that. I just want to highlight two. First of all, the bridegroom delights in His bride.

Jesus delights in the church because she has a role in His life. From the very beginning of the Bible, the bridegroom's bride had a role in His life.

Eve was created to be Adam's helper. She was made perfect for Him. And ever since, wives have been alongside their husbands helping and supporting them.

[14:28] And that means that if the church is a bride, then as that bride, she has a role in Jesus's life, in Jesus's life.

So the church serves Jesus. The church accomplishes things for Jesus. The church has given responsibilities by Jesus. The church has duties to do for Jesus. Now, that doesn't mean that the church is Jesus's slave.

No bride is a slave. But it means that the bride is a key part of the life of the husband. And that's an astounding truth.

Because we must never forget that at one level, God doesn't need us. He's completely self-sufficient. The love of God is independent. God does not need you or me.

But the message of the Bible is that the love of God is so great that He has opened out that love so that we have a place in it too. And the consequence of that is that now we are needed.

[15 : 28] You have a crucial role in the life of Jesus. He needs you alongside Him. He needs you working with Him. So Jesus needs people fed, both physically and spiritually. Jesus needs infants who need to be raised up.

He has a household that needs to be kept safe. He has a harvest that needs to be gathered. He has a message that needs to be spread. Who is the most important helper in all of that?

His bride, the church. So the bridegroom delights in the bride because she has a role in his life. The bridegroom also delights in his bride because she's beautiful.

Paul points towards that in verses 26 to 27. Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, have been cleansed by the washing of water with the word so that he might present the church to himself in splendor without spot or wrinkle or any such thing that she might be holy and without blemish.

The church as bride is beautiful. She's stunning without spot or wrinkle or blemish.

[16 : 40] Now you might say, well, hang on a minute, Thomas. That sounds like a contradiction because you just said two minutes ago that the bride was in a mess and that's true.

But the amazing thing about Jesus as bridegroom is that he chooses his bride when she's ugly, yet when he marries her, he makes her stunningly beautiful.

And that's because he cleanses us, he renews us, he wipes away every blemish and stain, he heals every wound and scar.

Now when we say all this, it's really important that we don't get our thinking back to front because I think it's very easy to think of this maybe the wrong way around.

When we think of beauty, we often think about putting stuff on. So people will, they'll put on makeup, they'll maybe dye their hair or get their hair styled, they'll paint their nails, they'll put on jewelry.

[17 : 44] Often when we think of a bride, we think of the fact that this bride is made beautiful by putting stuff on. And that of course is totally fine and totally normal. It's something that happens often.

But that's not what's being described here. Because with the church, it's the complete opposite that happens. The church is made beautiful not by putting on, but by washing off.

That's what verse 26 says. The splendor comes through washing. That means that the church as bride is made beautiful not by covering herself in things that make her look good, but by washing off all the muck and stain and damage of sin.

And this is extremely important to remember because it means that Jesus does not look at you and think, I need to change her to make her beautiful.

Instead he says, I need to cleanse her because underneath all that mess, she is beautiful. It's reminding us that all the stain of sin that's in us now, I should have said when I talk about her, I mean collectively, so men, you need to just embrace this, these pronouns.

[19 : 13] We're talking about the church. All the stain and ugliness that we have as men and women, all that damage is an intrusion, a horrible intrusion that's not meant to be there.

We were not made to be ugly. We were not made to be broken. We were made beautiful. But sin has ruined that.

Jesus has come to fix it and restore us. And all of that tells us that what Jesus wants is simply the real you.

He doesn't want a makeover bride. He wants a pure one. He wants the person that you really are. The person made to bear the image of God. The person who is the work of his hands.

The person who in God's sight is just so beautiful. The church as bride is stunning.

[20 : 08] She's been transformed from the ugliness of sin back to the pure beauty that she was always meant to bear.

And that of course is exactly what the world around us needs to see in us in the week ahead. The people who work with you, the people in your family, the people who see you and who see me day to day need to see that we are being transformed from brokenness to beauty.

So that our words, our actions, our conduct, our attitude, everything about us makes people look and think, wow, there is something beautiful about that person.

The bridegroom delights in his bride. And of course, that's where we link to the fact that a wedding is always an occasion that's full of abounding joy.

But perhaps the most precious truth of all of this is that it demonstrates to us the fact that you are wanted.

[21 : 20] Maybe you've been overlooked, forgotten, used or rejected. These are horrible things to experience.

With Jesus, you are so wanted. The bridegroom delights in his bride.

Number three, the bridegroom protects his bride. That truth is taught to us in verse 24 and verse 28 and 29. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies, so he who loves his wife loves himself, for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it just as Christ does the church because we are members of his body.

One of the great effects of Christianity on civilization is that it's transformed the status of women. Today in cultures that have been shaped by the Christian faith over the course of history, men and women are treated equally, or at the very least there's an expectation that men and women should be treated equally.

[22 : 30] This is a direct result of the gospel's influence. And so the fact that today women get the same education, same vote, same rights, same privileges as men are all a result of Christianity's influence.

Now if you don't believe that, jump on a plane and go to a country that's had very little Christian influence and come back and tell us if women are treated the same as they are here.

Today things are much better for women in countries where there's been a strong influence of Christianity. For women in the Old Testament and the New Testament, the situation was very, very different and we have to step into that world to understand what Paul is saying to us here.

Back then women were vulnerable and a woman's status, safety and security was all very dependent on getting married.

And a key part of the bridegroom's role was to protect his wife. That's why when we see this language of submission in passages like Ephesians 5, it's not remotely as oppressive or sexist as we might think it is in today's terms.

[23 : 44] In fact, it's the complete opposite I think because to be submitting to your husband meant to come under his authority. And in practical terms, the result of that was that you were brought under the care, the provision and the protection of your husband.

In biblical times, a husband was key to a woman's safety, security and prosperity. That's why the New Testament gives such strict instructions to husbands because women depended on them so much, husbands are to love their wives to the highest standard.

All of this is teaching us the fact that the church as bride is protected by her husband and Jesus does that for us in lots of ways.

He protects us by instructing us. And so when we speak of submission and authority, we are thinking of the commandments that he gives to us. And the reason Jesus gives us commandments is so that he can boss us around.

No. It's so that he can keep us safe and protect us from harm. Never ever forget that. Obeying Jesus will not spoil your life.

[25 : 00] It will stop you from spoiling your life. When the bride submits to her bridegroom, it means that she's safe.

Jesus also protects his bride by providing nourishment for us. And so the Bible, the sacraments, the Christian community, the personal devotion that we have, these are all means through which Christ nourishes us and feeds us.

And Jesus also protects us by holding us close to him. See, the word in the middle there on the second last line cherishes is an absolutely beautiful word because it basically means to make something warm.

And it's telling us that Jesus wants to draw you near and hold you close and keep you warm. And often we need to remember that because sometimes as Christians we feel like we're cold.

And as a result of that, we think, I should stay away from church. But that is never ever true.

[26 : 10] Jesus says, if you're cold, come close to me and I will warm you up. Jesus protects his bride.

And the reason that he wants to protect his bride is because you are precious.

Because you are so precious to him. And in a world that frequently crushes our self-esteem, whether it's at work or on social media or in our relationships, we need to listen to the theological truth that in Jesus' eyes you are so precious.

The bridegroom protects his bride. Fourthly, the bridegroom dies for his bride.

This is where we see just how precious the bride really is. Often when we think about weddings today, we think of joyful, happy, wonderful occasions, but we also think of the fact that they come at a cost and getting married can be quite an expensive thing these days.

[27 : 17] Now today, some of those costs are maybe not entirely necessary, but they are there and culture expects these costs to be met. In biblical times, it was even more serious because the cost was a necessity.

There was a bridal price that had to be paid to the girl's father. And a great example of that is Jacob, who had to pay seven years of labor for his bride.

And these costs are nothing compared to the cost paid by the church's bridegroom. Verse 25 tells us that, husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

Jesus didn't have to pay money for his bride. He had to die for her. The cost of the wedding was the cross.

And through that death, the bride is rescued. She's cleansed, restored, and healed, and she is united to her bridegroom forever.

[28 : 32] But we have to make sure we remember what we said a moment ago. This is not a forced marriage. The bridegroom actually makes a choice.

But Jesus, knowing the cost, knowing the pain, knowing the horror of the cross, looks at you, his bride, and says, she's worth it.

And that's why our wholehearted devotion to Jesus as our bridegroom is surely the only right response to his astonishing devotion to us.

So the bridegroom clings to his bride. The bridegroom delights in his bride. The bridegroom protects his bride. The bridegroom dies for his bride. Finally, the bridegroom comes for his bride.

As we said at the start, this image of the church as bride speaks ultimately of the church's destiny.

So yes, we are all united to Jesus as our husband by faith now.

[29 : 42] There's a sense in which it's already true, but there's also a not yet. And the fullness of this marriage union has not been realized now. It lies ahead of us in the future.

And that is described beautifully for us in the closing chapters of Revelation that we read. Then I saw our new heaven and our new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more.

And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.

He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more.

Death shall there be mourning, not crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. When Jesus returns, the church will enjoy perfect union with her bridegroom.

[30 : 44] Then our maker really will be our husband. Then we will enjoy all the best that our bridegroom can give us. Above all, then we will be with him forever.

And that means that right now we are waiting. But the closing message of the Bible is that the bridegroom is coming back.

He's coming for his bride. He's coming for you. The church as bride is waiting. That's why Revelation 22 says, The spirit and the bride say, Come.

And when he comes, he will wipe away every tear on his bride's face. That means that all the pain of sin-spoiled love will be healed.

All the hurts of singleness, of broken marriage, of widowhood, of broken hearts, all the agony that these things can cause will be healed.

[31 : 52] The bridegroom has gone to prepare a place for you. The bridegroom is coming back for you.

But that of course raises the question, why hasn't he come back yet? Well, I think the reason is because the bride isn't ready.

Not in the sense of the fact that of saying that she isn't beautiful enough, not saying that at all. But the bride isn't ready in the sense that parts of the bride are missing.

In other words, parts of the church are missing. Which part?

It's the people who are not yet trusting in Jesus. And if you're not a Christian, that means you.

[32 : 58] And all of this brings us to the final thing that we need to remember. We're saying that the church is a bride. That means that the bride is us as believers in Jesus.

We are the bride, all of us together. And that's where we see how important our collective love and unity in the church is. And this is a crucial thing to remember, and I think it's an easy one to forget, because often you will hear statements like this.

You'll hear statements or see them written down where they'll say, Jesus loves me. Or Jesus loves you. And that's true.

It's beautiful and precious, a wonderful thing to say, but it is not the ultimate theological truth when it comes to the love of Christ.

Because the ultimate theological truth is not Jesus loves me or Jesus loves you. The ultimate theological truth is that Jesus loves us.

[34 : 03] The pinnacle of His love is not for me as an individual. It is for us together as His bride.

And if we could just remember that, then surely it would make us the community of love and care and unity that the church is meant to be.

We are His bride together. So that is the church in pictures.

The church is a pillar standing firm, not wobbling, not shifting too and fro, but stable, holding steady on the truth in Jesus.

The church is a farm. That means that we are workers, not customers. The church is a body, every part as its place.

[35 : 01] We must not be dislocated. We must never, ever be self-harming. The church is a mother, not a machine.

We need to be maternal, not managerial, not mechanical. And the church is a bride, not a spoiled, demanding diva, but a beautiful, obedient, united bride.

Please God, may we be a church like that. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for all that you are teaching us through your word and for these beautiful images of your church.

And we pray, Lord, that as a church that we would be a pillar of truth, that we would be a farm working, sowing seed and building each other up, feeding one another, helping each other grow and reaching out into the harvest around us.

That we would be a body working together really well with us all playing our different parts in with our different gifts. That we would be a mother with the most wonderful tender care towards each of us.

[36 : 26] And that we would be your bride, perfectly living for you in obedience, faithfulness and devotion.

But in all of these things, we want to just acknowledge that all of that is only possible because of Jesus.

He's our bridegroom and we love Him. Amen.