

The bridegroom and eternal life

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[0:00] Just finding my place, testing that the sound is working. Good morning. Is it nice that it's cooler?

! Or do you want the hot weather back? I don't know. Right, where have we got to? Yeah, this is a lovely passage, but as Phil reminded me yesterday when we met for breakfast, there's quite a lot going on in here.

I hesitate to know whether I'm really equal to explain it all, but I will lead you through some of the wonderful truths here. And like we were praying, really, what will convince you of the truth of some of these large claims that are made in this passage?

It won't be my persuasive words, but it can be and should be the Spirit of God convicting, working. So my first question, just getting you into the subject of what's coming here, is how big is your God? And it'll come up later, but there's an illustration I've grabbed from somewhere, someone trying to represent the Transfiguration. But it shows Jesus surrounded with unapproachable light.

[1:15] But I ask you the question, as you're just thinking here, how big is your God? You may know the book, or heard of the book, Your God is Too Small?

J.B. Phillips, I think. And even if you haven't read it, you can probably guess where the book is going. Many of our problems that we suffer are because we don't really understand how big he is. And we kind of think the whole world centers on us. And if God isn't coming through and clearing the way for our path, I don't know, perhaps many people just conclude he's not very big.

How big is your God? Second thing that's coming out in our passage is how humble are you? Well, you might answer that one quite quickly, reasonably.

Reasonably, yeah? Reasonably humble, but are you? It's quite an easy thing to be deceived about, that we think we...

[2:19] Well, we'll explore what it means, but I think many of us suffer, perhaps particularly when we're tired and we get grouchy. We're not very humble at all. We just think we need to take control and rule over people.

There is a Chinese proverb I'm borrowing there, but it seems to have a lot of truth in it. And it's talking about the strength of bamboo, but yet it says that the taller it goes, the higher you grow, the deeper you bow.

I thought there's some... Bamboo is actually a very strong thing. And if you don't know much about... I don't know that much about China, but I do know they don't have so many metal scaffold poles. And when they have to do that stuff around buildings, they use this product.

It's a strong thing. But like the bamboo, the taller it is, the deeper you bow. And then the third question, which might sound a bit general.

What do you know about life? I should think if we took a little survey in here, we'd find a vast range of life that we know about. Some with many years.

[3:30] Some with a lot of joy. Some with, I'm sure, a lot of pain and hardship. But I hope for believers, still the testimony that they've known God in it.

But there is things in here about eternal life towards the end of our passage. And we will come to that. And so the final introductory question is, what story are you living in?

And I think I've hinted at what I mean by that. That if you look to God to arrange a few convenient things to make your life better, and perhaps in the end, just simply as a better option than living eternity without God, you just want eternal life.

Kind of, are you just trying to tick the box? And is your God really quite small? And are you actually full of anguish and disappointment about the struggles in life?

And I think I'm trying to, by the end of what we're talking about here, I just want to let us stand back and see God's larger story, which is about the fact that, yes, mankind fell, but God has stepped in and is doing a wonderful work, calling a people to himself.

[4:50] Phil has reminded us that perhaps the people of God, at the moment, we can look amongst ourselves and we can see little glimpses of beauty, but actually quite a lot of problems amongst ourselves. What is it in us that God is loving and enjoying, but God is working in his people, changing this bride that might be like a Cinderella in ashes, changing us into something really beautiful.

So get that glimpse that he loves us deeply, yes, but our individual lives not right at the centre of things. There's this larger story going on, and he's not promised us yet that we are free from trouble.

So let's get back to, I'm starting, the passage we're looking at, though we read a bit more, I'm starting in verse 22, and it says that Jesus now moves out into the Judean countryside to spend some time.

It says that Jesus was baptising, which is interesting, because John was baptising at the same time. A small detail you'll find if you just look ahead to the first verse of chapter 4, is that although Jesus was organising this, I think it was the disciples who were actually doing the baptising, but Jesus was calling people to be baptised.

There was plenty of water, it says in our passage, which is perhaps at least a strong hint that the idea of baptism needing a lot of water is certainly a bit more than just the odd spot or two, is implied.

[6:28] People were coming. But then we hear of this argument between the disciples and a particular Jew, as much as we're told is it's about ceremonial washing.

Now, I'm not going to pretend I'm a complete expert on what the Jews exactly did in those times, but they would have had very particular rituals, probably before a certain event, you must wash yourself in this way.

And then I suppose this thing of John's baptism and Jesus' baptising comes along, which is utterly different, and they're probably thinking, hmm, you know, is this really right? And they're thinking, having an argument.

But they also notice, and this is the key part of what comes in this first bit, the disciples say to John, this is in verse 26, that man, the one you testified about, look, he is baptising, and everyone is going to him.

They didn't like that Jesus was becoming more popular, but doesn't it make you smile a little that they couldn't even remember his name? That man over there, I don't know who he is, but he's got this big crowd going to him.

[7:48] Had they been listening to John, who's always been saying that he wasn't the Messiah and he's looking forward to the one that would come? So we'll go through three different things.

One is humility, one is to do with the exalted bridegroom, and the other one is about eternal life. That's where I'm leading our thoughts.

So I repeat the caption we saw about humility. Now, has that got obscured? Probably has. But yeah, John was one of the greatest people that has ever lived, and that's actually testified to in Matthew.

He was greater than any other prophet. If you think about it, in the time in the wilderness, he would have been the big thing. Everyone knew about crowds going to see John.

He was really popular, well known. He was pointing the way to Jesus, but he was drawing crowds. You can just compare the way his life was starting.

[8:58] Jesus comparatively grew up in obscurity, grew up in Nazareth. And certainly before the event of clearing the temples and miracles starting to happen, Jesus had very few people who knew about him or followed him.

So we see John's disciples are moaning about Jesus' popularity, but John's focus is still very clear. A person, and he leads us through some things, doesn't he, in verse 27, says, a person can only

receive, this is his answer to his disciples, can only receive what is given from heaven. So John isn't thinking, wow, you know, this person over there has got more than I have. How do I get there? How do I become like him and get the crowd back? John accepts, we in the church need to learn to accept that we are all so different.

When we work together well by the Holy Spirit and we all do our bit, there's something very beautiful that can happen. Some tasks are more lowly, some are a little more prominent, but there is a beauty in it.

But there's the sense of humility that we should thank God for what we have and not waste our time looking around wishing we were like someone else.

[10:18] And it is a problem. Many of us are quite insecure and you look around, oh, I wish I just had those gifts. Don't spend your life wishing you were someone you're not. And the supporting verse, this is from 1 Corinthians 4, for who makes you different from anyone else?

What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not? Second thing John says, it's quite simple.

He hadn't forgotten, even if his disciples have. I've always said, I'm not the Christ, just the messenger. And then we hear about the bride belonging to the bridegroom.

Phil has hinted to that in what we've been going through already. Worth pointing out that although we understand ourselves from the New Testament, a lot of talk about the bride of Christ and from Revelation, much of that probably wouldn't be known to John at the time, but he would have known his Old Testament scriptures.

And I just found that one in Isaiah, as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so God will rejoice over you. Definitely a passage talking about Zion. But the bride is for the bridegroom.

[11:40] And Jesus, just the friend, John is just the friend who attends the bridegroom. But when the bridegroom arrives, what joy, what joy is there.

And just culturally, it is worth remembering, we know in our country, a typical wedding, you've been to many, I'm sure, that the bridegroom is standing at the front waiting.

And the glorious arrival, surely, is the bride. often we're meant to wait just a few minutes after time, aren't we? The bride appears. And it's almost like all the attention is on the bride.

But I think I'm right in saying that the way marriage has worked in the New Testament, very different. It was the bridegroom who was the key figure.

And everyone else and the bride would be waiting. Sometimes they'd probably, you know, it's not like they had watches and synchronized, you know. Sometime today he's coming, or it might even be tomorrow, but the crowd is waiting.

[12:47] And the bridegroom, perhaps often even carried on poles in some of these things, the bridegroom appears as the glorious one. And the bride is full of, she's been made to wait a lot, but she's very happy when the bridegroom arrives.

So again, I borrow some images that may or may not be very exact, but there is just this picture as we're thinking about God's people. Jesus, just picture Jesus working amongst his people and his church, changing them slowly but surely into something more and more beautiful.

But when the bridegroom arrives, what joy. Now John sees Jesus, the bridegroom, starting to take more prominence and he's just thrilled.

He was just the bridegroom's attendant pointing the way. What joy. And he says this very pithy, punchy comment, he must become greater and I must become less.

He must become greater. I must become less. And perhaps that's one of the most important. anyone who's at the front wants to be a pastor or a minister, that's the best lesson you could ever learn is this, that you stand, you want to see Jesus become greater.

[14:10] You don't want to, you don't want to end up with fame or a reputation yourself. You want to do well, but he must become greater. I must become less. Now, I just noticed that this thought I thought was quite helpful.

Perhaps the best of ministers who can stand at the front and talk about Jesus, they might be able to just give you a little glimmer of light like a star in the night that doesn't really light up very much.

But when the sun rises, with all that brightness and glory, those little stars just, you can't see them anymore, can you? You can't see them.

So I just bring you a few other passages from around the Bible, New Testament, about humility, reminding us that it's not just John's attitude here.

Clothe yourselves, this is from 1 Peter, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another because God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under God's mighty hand that he may lift you up in due time.

[15:22] Philippians, do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, rather in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interest but each of you to the interest of others.

Can I remind you of that question, are you humble? And you quickly said yes. What about testing you on this one? in humility considering others better than yourselves, valuing others more than yourselves.

Now do you feel so good at that? That's the calling, that's the task, looking to the interest of others. And then in 2 Corinthians 4, for God who said, let light shine out of darkness made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

But it says we have this treasure in jars of clay so that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. And I won't quote them all but there are other, and whoever finds their life will lose it.

whoever loses their life for my sake will find it. Now that's a little bit of a conundrum, isn't it, that needs testing out. But the idea really is that if you surrender to Jesus, to God, you follow his ways, that humanly speaking, and if you don't understand anything, you think this is crazy.

[16:50] You know, I suppose the fear is he might be a complete nutcase that's going to direct you somewhere really strange. But in surrendering to him, in giving to him, Jesus is beautiful in the way he helps us to blossom and brings out a glory that reflects back to him.

So I ask again, are you humble? Do you value others above yourself? Don't let that one skip away from being remembered.

Do you value others above yourself? do you enjoy seeing all of the glory going to God? Or perhaps you just want a bit of recognition for yourself?

Perhaps you do do some quiet act of service somewhere and sometimes someone might draw some attention to it and you're thinking, yeah, but then sometimes it's forgotten and you're sitting there thinking, hmm, kind of grisly.

there was an old youth club in a church I was in in Bristol once when I was studying there. It said, it's hard to be humble when you're as great as we are.

[18:06] That was the team in their sports activities. Made us all smile. But can I ask you, have you taken this step of giving up your life, giving all of it to Jesus?

And the real test and testimony is by so doing, have you actually found your life? I think there are many in this group here today that could stand up and say, yes. They probably acknowledge they haven't completely surrendered everything to God, they're doing their best.

But have they found life? Yes, yes they have. Yes we have. So beware of the mixed motives.

Offering an act of service to God is actually reward enough.

Is it not? If others say you've done well, be thankful, God is honoured. But don't do things looking for the praise of others because the devil can use that.

And so easily you might have been going on an even good path but then loads of people praise you and you suddenly think oh maybe I'm a bit better than I thought I was. And you get puffed up and then God can't do so much through people who are puffed up.

[19:25] This is many of you know I like a lot of casting crowns things. This is some words from a song of theirs. Make it count. This is the worldly way of going on.

Make it count. Leave a mark. Build a name for yourself. Dream your dreams. Chase your heart above all else. Make a name the world remembers. That's what people like to do.

But all an empty world can sell is empty dreams. A few other words but Jesus is the only name to remember. I don't want to leave a legacy. I don't care if they remember me.

Only Jesus and I've only got one life to live. Let every second point to him. Only Jesus. So that's about humility. humility. Let's move on to talk about this exalted bridegroom.

We have touched on the fact that there is the bridegroom. And in this next section of the passage John is comparing himself to Jesus. And what do we hear first in verse 31?

[20:28] The one who comes from above or from heaven is above all. Perhaps it sounds rather obvious but it's worth thinking about it just to get the truth of it.

The one who comes from above is and the comparison of course is John remembers that he is from the earth. Apart from what he's been given from heaven he can just speak about the things he knows on the earth.

But this one Jesus is from above. And I just remind you of some other texts. A few weeks ago when we were in the start of John. In the beginning was the word and the word was with God.

The word being Jesus. The word was God. Through him all things were made. In him was life and that life was the light of mankind. This is the Jesus who was now just over there baptizing people. This is the one who is from above. This is the one who is so different than any other person you have ever met. God. And the other thing here is that whereas John is passing on something he's been given Jesus is testifying to what he has seen and heard.

[21:42] Where has he been? In heaven. How long has he been there? 30 years? No it's a lot. He's been there always. So he's been there always.

Close to the heart of the father. father and he's now passing on what he has seen and heard. Message from heaven. So it says the one whom God has sent, that's Jesus, speaks the very words of God.

It also says that he has the spirit without limit. Now anyone who is a little bit newer to learning about the Christian faith, the spirit is given to all of us.

but particular gifts different to different people and none of us could really say we have any idea about what it might be like to have the spirit without limit.

But the spirit, there is a sense of power in the spirit. The disciples and the apostles also did some of the miracles.

[22:48] But Jesus who has the spirit without limit, he could make winds and waves die down. This was indeed the special one. And it says also there, to do with the authority he's been given, that the father loves the son and has placed everything in his hands.

I don't know whether my small words are putting Jesus as high as he should be, but he is the exalted bridegroom. and I just bring in some other passages that speak into this theme.

You know this well in the end of Matthew 28, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age. all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to this Jesus. Yet we're told in our passage, it actually says no one accepts his message, I think by implication that clearly some do, only a few are accepting his message.

This one from heaven, this one compared to John who's come from comparative obscurity, only a few accept his message. But those who do, it says, confirm that God is truthful.

[24:21] So do you, I know many of you, quite a few I don't know, do you accept his message? Broadly, what is Jesus' message?

That mankind is in trouble, sin is a big problem, and that he's come with a heart of love to make a way out.

the only way out. Do you accept his message? Many of us actually think we know better than God. It goes back to this idea of whether our story is the larger story or the small story that's just centered on how it's working out for us. we tend to weigh up what God says and does, and if it doesn't quite make sense, we don't get quite how above all God is.

We almost think we can be a semi-equal watching what happens and thinking we have an equal opinion. When nothing of the kind is true, he is above all.

[25:34] Above all. just bear with me whilst I find a bit in Isaiah that brings this home. I just want to read from verses 22.

Glorious words about this God. He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy and spreads them out like a tent to live in.

He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground than he blows on them and they wither and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal, says the Holy One? Lift up your eyes, look to the heavens, who created all these?

Who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name? Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.

[26:56] And another passage I want to read, which is focusing a little on transfiguration and an image I borrow. Matthew 17 verses 2 to 5.

Most of the words, apart from the last bit, were said at his baptism, but there's this little extra thing at the end of this. Then he was transfigured before them.

his face shone like the sun. This is Jesus who's high up on a mountain. His face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as the light.

And just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus. And Peter said to Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.

And while he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them and a voice from the cloud said, this is my son whom I love, with him I am well pleased.

[28:08] But at this point it's added, listen to him. Listen to him. We're not singing today, but some of you will know that song there, that chorus, above all powers, above all kings, above all nature and created things, above all wisdom and the ways of man.

You were there before the world began. Above all kingdoms, above all thrones, above all wonders the world has ever known, above all wealth and treasures of the earth, there's no way to measure what you're worth.

This bridegroom is exalted, high, high above, nothing you could compare him with. And be careful because I think the reality is that when we are finding our particular life is tough and we are tempted to doubt, God isn't that big because otherwise he'd be coming through and making my life fine.

That's not what he's promised to do here and now. so then the last subject in our passage is eternal life and we read in verse 36 it says whoever believes in the son has eternal life.

So can I ask you, I think I said this in the introduction, what do you know about life? life? And if Jesus is talking about eternal life, what does Jesus know about life?

[29:44] Well, one obvious comparison, I mean if I were to talk about what I know about life, I've been around a few decades, I've seen a few things but what do I know?

Jesus, he's been around for eternity. He never had a beginning, he will never have an end. That's impressive enough, isn't it?

But there's more. What about the quality? I just want to dwell in this latter part of what we're doing here in God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the way they relate together.

What has Jesus known even before the world and mankind was made? In John 1 we've touched on this, in him was life and that life was the light of all mankind.

But how do these three persons of the Godhead relate? Well, we've read Matthew 17. Just pick up these little phrases in case you miss them.

[30:50] This is my son whom I love, not who is my servant and just does my bidding. This is my son whom I love. The father loves the son.

With him I'm well pleased. And I read in preparing around this, John 17, perhaps if you wanted to read anything fully at home, John 17 is full of nuggets of truth.

Jesus looked towards heaven as he's praying. This is the early part of John 17. Father, the hour has come. Glorify your son that your son may glorify you.

See how they just both want to glorify each other. Isn't that beautiful? For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you've given him.

So the father has given us to Jesus. Now this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ who you have sent.

[31:56] I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. We're not talking a lot about it in this summer, that included the cross taking the punishment for sin. And let me read, if I can just turn to that in John 17 verses 6 to 10.

Just bear with me. I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world.

They were yours, you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them.

they knew with certainty that I came from you and they believed that you sent me. I pray for them. I'm not praying for the world but for those you have given me for they are yours. All I have is yours and all you have is mine and glory has come to me through them.

[33:12] Do you see this beautiful picture of interrelating persons in the Trinity we've talked about the Father and the Son mainly so far but the joy of giving to so they understood this idea of thinking of another better than yourselves.

They were doing it all the time. So in this eternity that Jesus knew about before he came to earth there was a quality of relationships he knew all about.

And as verse 18 in John 17 as you sent me into the world Jesus is sending us. And then read believers and this is in 22 to 23 I have given them the glory you gave me that they may be one as we are one then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you've loved me.

You see the link to our passage about seeing this beauty and the pointer to lead people to God.

Then we haven't mentioned the Holy Spirit in the Godhead.

The Holy Spirit is talked about as a helper. He descended on Jesus in bodily form as a dove at his baptism sent in Jesus name to believers to teach all things to help them remember what Jesus said.

[34:38] He is here with us helping to understand. I'm doing my best to point to a few lovely truths in his word. It's the Spirit of God who can work this deep into us.

He was poured out at Pentecost in Acts 2. you glance there plenty of opportunities to see the power of signs and wonders but the power of God at work energizing believers.

So you just see we've been looking at those verses but let me just bring that to a head. Jesus loves to do the Father's bidding. Jesus loves to see the Father honored.

The Father loves to glorify the Son. The Spirit loves to help believers to glorify God. It is like an intimate dance.

And there is another way of seeing how we are invited into this life that God is inviting us to join this way of living. To join this dance.

[35:46] and I think yeah the final part though yes whoever believes in the Son has eternal life.

So for believers this is not just life without end. It is a beautiful life. To be deeply loved by God our deepest joy to glorify God and value others first value on others first others deepest joy to do the same and to value us first.

We've been sent into the world so that others may see God's beauty in us and be drawn to him. But there is this solemn warning and I can't miss it out. Whoever believes we've touched on in the Son has eternal life.

But whoever rejects this Son has not even seen life. So they might know something about an existence on this earth for a few years. But they will not see life.

They will not see this. Don't let that be you if you've heard about this Jesus. If I manage by God's help to do anything to help you to fall in love with him.

[37:04] Don't reject this Son who is so beautiful and tender. So I'll just whiz over everything we've covered just with a few headings.

Humility is a key principle of ministry. He must become greater, I must become less. The exalted bridegroom, the one who is above all, speaks the very words of God.

It says, listen to him. he loves believers deeply and shares his glory with us.

Believers are given eternal life, an eternal beautiful life. Believe in the Son and join this dance and I don't think that's an incorrect way of putting it.

It is like a dance of mutual glorifying one another. I picked up an English version of Pilgrim's Progress and I just wanted to end with that simple thought.

[38:15] You'll know at the start Pilgrim is with his family in a city that he's heard will be destroyed and he has this heavy burden on his back which is actually his sin and he says, what am I going to do?

What am I going to do? And I won't quote it exactly from it. I'll just give you the bits I can remember. He's looking, he's struggling and in fact, he says, but his family, his wife and children actually didn't understand much about this.

They just thought he'd gone a bit nutty. But then evangelist comes to him and says, yes, you do need to go. This city is going to be destroyed. Can you see the light over by the wicket gate?

Head there. So he starts to move. But his wife and children, the two think he's gone mad saying, no, no, no. So what's the beautiful end of this? He puts his fingers in his ears and says, life, life, eternal life.

And he presses on because he knows that he must take hold of it. So there we are. I think we're done. So thank you. I'll hand back to Phil.