

The bride

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[0 : 00] I will be referring to quite a lot of scriptures. I have put page numbers on for all of them. Some of them are on the slide, some of them are not. You probably won't want to find all of them. But there's one or two longer passages that will be worth us looking up together. Otherwise, perhaps if you just listen and where possible, I'll put some of them up on the screen. So here's some more words from the Song of Solomon. These words this time are obviously the words of the lover, the male character.

And he says this. You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride. You have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace.

How delightful is your love, my sister, my bride. How more pleasing is your love than wine and the fragrance of your perfume than any spice.

[1 : 06] We'll return to that passage at the end, in fact. Here's another verse this time from the Psalms. And this is the wedding song. Psalm 45, of course, is a song about a royal wedding.

And this is addressed to the bride. Psalm 45, verses 10 and 11. Listen, O daughter, consider and give ear.

Forget your people and your father's house. The king is enthralled by your beauty. Honor him, for he is your lord.

Everyone loves a love story, don't they? There's lots of money to be made from rom-com films and the like.

Every culture has its Cinderella stories. The prince who comes and rescues the girl from poverty or whatever.

[2 : 09] Some of them are made up stories like Cinderella or Romeo and Juliet. But often we find real love stories. And when we find them in our history books, they appeal to us, don't they?

I was reminded of the story of Elizabeth Woodville, the White Queen. If you haven't seen that TV series, if you ever got a chance, it's about Elizabeth Woodville, who was a major player during the Wars of the Roses.

She was married. And I forgot to check which king. Was it Richard II? Edward. Edward, wasn't it? Yeah. Yeah. One of the Yorkist kings, anyway.

And it appears to have been a real love story then. It wasn't just a political wedding. It appears to have been a real love story. Often the true stories are more compelling than the fiction.

And they're always more complicated. There was a film called Into the Woods where Disney kind of made fun of the traditional fairy tales by pointing out that you don't all ever really live happily ever after.

[3 : 16] It's always more complicated than that. But the real stories are more complex, of course. And the interesting thing about love stories is that the role of the woman in these stories varies quite considerably.

In some of them, like in Cinderella, if you think about it, Cinderella does little but stand around and look beautiful while the story sort of happens around her. She doesn't really do very much.

And would you really want Cinderella as a role model for your daughters? I think probably not.

Perhaps Elizabeth Woodville will be a better role model, one who was a major player in the Wars of the Roses, a very strong woman.

And the ancient Jewish culture, as we've already seen from some of these readings, is no different in this respect. But in the Jewish culture, there were a few Cinderella's.

There are good women and there are bad women. There are good wives. There are unfaithful wives. But they're all very active, good or bad.

[4 : 24] Just as a few names. Good queens. Eve. Delilah. Rachel. Ruth. Abigail. Bathsheba. Jezebel. Esther. Good queens and bad queens.

Good women and bad women. Yet they all had in common, at least, that they were very strong women, very active women. And these histories have a persuasive force.

And even the ancient battle between wisdom and folly is presented in Proverbs, isn't it, as the rivalry between two women, wisdom and folly. And then, of course, at the end of Proverbs, we have this description of the faithful wife, which I won't have time to look at.

But, of course, in the Jewish culture, these stories also, they're not just stories. They're not even just histories. They have a spiritual significance as well.

And so Sarah becomes the mother of Isaac. And we're told that Sarah's child is the child of promise, the child born to the free woman.

[5 : 28] Whereas Abraham's other son, Ishmael, is born to the slave woman and does not inherit the promise. The boys have the same father, but it's the mother that matters.

The mother is slave or free. We have the story of Ruth, who, of course, was a Moabitess. And, generally speaking, the Jews were forbidden to marry the Moabites.

But Ruth, of course, converted to Judaism and became, of course, the grandmother of King David. And the force of these stories is often in the detail, isn't it?

So, I was intrigued when I was looking this up. In describing the death of Jezebel, Jezebel was a real queen, but is almost archetypally the wicked queen.

She's almost like a character out of a fairy story. You think of her as almost the archetypal wicked queen who caused so much mayhem in Israel. And in 2 Kings 9.30, when the historian records her death, it provides us with the interesting detail that when she realized her time was up and her death was coming, what did she do?

[6 : 43] She puts on her makeup and fixes her hair, which tells us very little about the history, but an awful lot about Jezebel herself, doesn't it? It's in 2 Kings 9.30, if you don't believe me.

That's exactly what it says. And we compare Jezebel to Esther, the faithful queen. What does Esther do at a time of crisis?

She puts on her best clothes to petition the king, Esther 5 verse 1. She knows that her petition could prove fatal, but she is the faithful wife. The faithful, well, not a mother at that time, but the faithful mother is often an important character in these Old Testament histories.

These are iconic stories. The faithful wife and a mother, or the unfaithful, adulterous one. They're important in these stories. And it's not surprising, therefore, as we've seen, that in the prophets, Israel herself is often presented as the bride.

Perhaps Israel or perhaps Jerusalem. They're presented as the bride of the Lord, the bride of Yahweh, the one whom the Lord found, rescued.

[8 : 00] This business about kicking about in the blood. Then Ezekiel is suggesting that she was an abandoned baby. He found her as an abandoned baby and came and rescued her.

She was the one who God found and sought out and raised to royal status. But we find in most of the prophetic writings that Israel is the unfaithful bride.

And Ezekiel and Hosea are the prime examples of this. These two passages we read part of, and I say we couldn't possibly read all of them. But there are others. In Jeremiah, for instance, the same image is used.

Later on in that story of Hosea, he has to go and get his wife back. Hosea, in fact, is told to take a wife he knows will be unfaithful.

And then he then has three children by her, a son named Jezreel. Now Jezreel actually means God sows. But there's a kind of pun, I guess, on the name of Jehu, which Jehu means God is he.

[9 : 09] So what did Jehu sow in Jezreel? Not the crops, but blood. It became the field of blood. And then he had a daughter called No Mercy and a son called Not My People.

And then, we didn't read this bit, but if you read on, is why unfaithfulness gets her into trouble.

We're not told exactly how. Hosea has to go and buy her back from the slave market.

Well, you wouldn't think perhaps this was good advice for the young prophet contemplating marriage. But this is a great picture of Israel rescued from slavery in Egypt, raised to the most privileged position in God's sight, but then continually unfaithful.

Again and again, she's rescued and restored. And again and again, her unfaithfulness is repeated. And so this is the situation at the beginning when the New Testament opens.

This is an open question at the start of the New Testament. Will the king find a faithful bride? Ezekiel had promised that he would, but there didn't seem to be much evidence of it so far. [10:36] Perhaps the Jews of Jesus' time might finally provide the faithful bride. But unfortunately, it seems not. In fact, in Matthew 12, 39, Jesus describes them as a wicked and adulterous generation.

They may have given up the sort of idolatry before the exile, but in terms of faithfulness to the covenant, they were as bad, if not worse, than their ancestors.

Jesus denounces the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed. He says, Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! The miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon.

They would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. I tell you what would be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies?

No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. I tell you, it would be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.

[11:43] And again, Sodom, the archetypal city, the iconic city of violence and rape and mistreatment of strangers.

The one that is destroyed when only Lot and his family escaped. But, I mean, again, you're almost shocked by the vehemence of the language, aren't you?

He says, It will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for the Jews of Jesus' day. So where is this faithful bride to be found?

God is not to be denied. He had promised that he would provide a faithful bride. And, in fact, it turns out he's going to provide a faithful bride for his own son.

Actually, in the Gospels, we read more of the bridegroom and the wedding feast than of the bride herself. It's in the writings of Paul and Revelation that we read more of the bride. And we'll look at one or two of these things.

[12:54] So let's look at these four topics to see if we can see what the Scripture has to say about this. First of all, what about the bridegroom?

Secondly, who is invited to the wedding? Then what does the Scripture say about the bride herself? And then, I thought it was worth saying something about the wedding.

Because there is something about the wedding in Revelation and, of course, in the Song of Solomon. So we'll do that at the end. So who is the bridegroom, first of all?

Well, we can... Sorry, change slides. We can find that out. John chapter 3, verses 28 and 29. Because John the Baptist tells us.

John replied, A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said I'm not the Christ, but I'm sent ahead of him.

[13:58] The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine and it is now complete.

What is John the Baptist saying here? He said he was the one who was sent to announce that the bridegroom is coming. But now that the bridegroom has come, then he must, as it were, step aside. He's no longer the center of attention. The Son has come from heaven to seek his bride. That's what John is telling us. To seek a bride who will be faithful to her vows and covenant.

He seeks an Esther who will replace the arrogant and disobedient Queen Vashti. And it's interesting to think about this Esther for a moment. Vashti was a queen of the blood, a noble woman. But she acted ignobly. Esther wasn't a noble woman by birth. But she would achieve nobility through her faithfulness. The queen of promise, Israel, had proven unfaithful.

[15:07] And as for Queen Vashti, a replacement was required. So John tells us that the bridegroom has come. And you might think from then that it means the wedding was imminent.

But it turns out there's a delay. John's disciples came. This is Matthew 9, 14 to 15. John's disciples came and asked him, How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?

Jesus answered, How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn when he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them. Then they will fast. Matthew 25, verse 5 is the parable of the unwise virgins.

But one verse from it says this, The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. The wedding is delayed, it seems. Why the delay?

Well, why is a wedding ever delayed? The usual problems. The bride isn't ready, and there's a problem with the guest list. So let's look at those two things.

[16 : 29] Let's look at the guest list first. I'm not going to say too much about this, but it is an issue that is raised in the Gospels.

You might like to, it's a slightly longer passage, you might like to look up Matthew 22 on page 990. I'm not going to do much more than just read this parable, and then just point out very briefly what it says.

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.

Then he sent some more servants and said, Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner. My oxen and fatted cattle have been slaughtered, and everything's ready. Come to the wedding banquet.

But they paid no attention and went off, one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, ill-treated them, and killed them. The king was enraged.

[17 : 38] He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come.

Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you can find. So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.

But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. Friend, he asked, How did you get in here without wedding clothes? The man was speechless.

The king told the attendants, Tie him hand and foot and throw him outside into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are invited, but few are chosen.

I'm not going to say very much about this at all, but who is invited? Well, who wants to come? Well, you have to want to come to the wedding ceremony of the lamb, but even then you can't just come in anyway.

[18 : 46] You have to wear the proper clothes. And these people were dragged in off the streets, so presumably the clothes were provided by the king himself, but one person had not put them on.

It was not suitable to be a guest. Well, I won't say more about the wedding supper of the lamb, although we do come back to it briefly when we look in Revelation.

But there was a problem with the guest list. People who had been invited made their excuses and didn't want to come. And I guess it's a bit of a mixed metaphor here, because in a sense we're both the bride and the wedding and the guests, but let's not get too hung up over that.

If we want to be at the wedding supper of the lamb, then we have to respond to his invitation, and we have to come suitably dressed in the garments that he provides.

But let's not spend too long on that. Let's turn our attention to the bride herself. And of course the key verse here is Ephesians 5, verses 25 to 27.

[20 : 06] Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

What's Paul saying here? Well, he's saying that the bride must be beautiful on her wedding day. But she's not ready. But the bridegroom has made provision for that.

The disease of sin that had made her ugly has been cured by the sacrifice of Christ. But some of the damage done by that disease is still visible.

The appropriate lotion and potions must be applied, and that treatment will take some time. But we're told that the most effective body wash is available.

What is it? It's the word, isn't it? Cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, present her as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish.

[21 : 22] How can we be prepared to be the radiant bride? How as a people can we be the, make ourselves beautiful for the wedding day?

Well, it's through, we're told, washing with the word, making ourselves, changing ourselves through the word to be getting rid of all the spots and wrinkles.

What about the wedding itself? And we have to look largely to Revelation for that.

And of course, this is still in the future, which is why you have to look to Revelation for it. But there are great descriptions of the wedding supper of the Lamb. Revelation 19, verses 1 and 2.

We'll read first of all what happens to the adulteress, because that's what happens in chapter 19, verses 1 and 2. After this, I heard and sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven, shouting, Hallelujah!

[22 : 42] Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries.

He has avenged on her the blood of his servants. So the adulteress has been put aside and judged. And then, moving on, in verses 7 to 9, we read this.

Let us rejoice and be glad, and give him glory, for the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.

Here, fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints. Spot the Ezekiel reference there. Fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.

Then the angel said to me, Right, blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb. And he added, These are the true words of God. That's Revelation 19.

[23 : 49] And then we pick up in Revelation 21 and 22. 21 verse 2. It says, I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

And in verse 11, It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. And I suppose comparing a woman to a city, or a city to a woman, whichever way you want to look at it, does seem a little strange to our ears.

But, of course, that's exactly what Ezekiel had done. He had compared Jerusalem. He'd said Jerusalem was the unfaithful bride. And in fact, if you read, then we won't look at this bit, but you do find similar images, actually in the Song of Solomon, as the wife being described, among other things, as a beautiful building, beautiful tower.

We can be sure that it is still the church that Revelation is talking about when it talks about the new Jerusalem, the bride.

Why do I say that? Well, because in verse 17, chapter 22, verse 17, we read the following words. The spirit and the bride say, come, and let him who hears say, come, whoever is thirsty, let him come, and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.

[25 : 31] This is the wedding invitation. The spirit and the bride say, come. The bride is the church, the city, the people of God.

And it's, she's standing up there saying, come, take the water of life. Whoever is thirsty, let him come, whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.

Cities can't speak, of course, but the bride can. It's the bride herself, through the spirit, who invites whoever will come to come and take the free gift of the water of life.

And I was going to stop there. My original plan was to stop there. But then I thought there's something more to be said.

One thing that's puzzled me of late is that in a culture which has largely devalued marriage, has devalued sexual union, it seems to be now de rigueur to spend large amounts of money on the wedding.

[26 : 53] wedding. My wife ran up her own wedding dress on her mother's sewing machine. But now you can't do that anymore.

The bargain basement, you've got to pay two or three hundred quid for a decent wedding dress. people spend, you know, there was a, I think I noticed in the, in the news, I think today or yesterday in the newspaper, somebody had offered Ian McKellar a million pounds to turn up as Gandalf at a Tolkien themed wedding.

Interestingly, he turned it down. He said Gandalf doesn't go to weddings. But why is this? Why do people spend so much money on their weddings?

And I, I think actually these facts are related. The very fact that we have so much devalued marriage in our culture means that people think you have to make it special somehow.

You know, it should be something that's special so we'll throw money at it. And even the ordinary families spend ten grand or twenty grand even thirty grand. on a wedding. I mean, that could be a deposit on your first house.

[28 : 17] But people spend enormous amounts of money. What we did with our daughters actually was said this is the budget you can spend what you want on the wedding and the rest you can keep.

But I don't know whether that's the best approach or not. But why is it? People think you've got to make it special. And I think the reason is that it's because actually marriage isn't special anymore. marriage is not just a social arrangement although it is to some extent that. Sometimes marriage is a political arrangement.

It usually is between kings and queens between rulers and kings but it shouldn't be just that. A true marriage a real marriage is about passion isn't it?

The central thing about a wedding is not the guests even is not the wedding cake the central thing is the delight that the husband and wife have in each other and of course our devaluing of sexual union has taken some of that away.

[29 : 32] but that's what a marriage should be. And so I thought I would actually conclude not with those words of revelation but by quoting again from the song and in fact that passage that I started with but I'll read a little bit more of it.

It's on page 680 in the church bibles it's from chapter four and these are the words of the lover of the the male character and it's what he does is he takes delight in his now flawless bride let's finish with these words until the day breaks and the shadows flee I will go to the mountain of myrrh and to the hill of incense all beautiful you are my darling there is no floor in you come with me from Lebanon my bride come with me from Lebanon descend from the crest of Amarna from the top of Senea the summit of Hermon from the lion's den and the mountain haunts of the lepers you have stolen my heart my sister my bride you have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes with one jewel of your necklace how delightful is your love my sister my bride how much more pleasing is your love than wine and the fragrance of your perfume than any spice your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb my bride milk and honey are under your tongue the fragrance of your garments is like that of

Lebanon you are a garden locked up my sister my bride you are a spring enclosed a sealed fountain I'll stop there but of course there is much more of it if you want to read the Song of Solomon for yourself sometime but this is the delight that the bridegroom takes in his bride it is not a political arrangement the bridegroom takes delight and finds that his bride is now flawless and our last hymn captures that it's a hymn called Emmanuel in modern hymn by Stuart Townend thank you thank you thank you thank you