

From Engagement To Wedding Feast

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[0 : 00] Lord Jesus, we thank you that the Apostle John was empowered by your Spirit to remember these words and then to write them down for us.

I pray now in your mercy and grace, you would help us enter into the reality these words are describing as never before. For we pray it in your name and for the greater fame of your name. Amen. Once again, I invite you to continue exploring with me the space in which we are now called to follow.

Jesus is risen. He is ascended. The one who was crucified is risen and has ascended to the right hand of the Father. How do we now follow him?

What is the context? What is the environment in which he now calls us to follow? It is a very different space than the one in which the first disciples, Peter, Mary, and John were called to follow.

[1 : 09] It is a very different space than the one in which we will one day follow when he comes again and brings with him a new heaven and a new earth and when we see him face to face.

For unlike the space in which the first disciples followed and unlike that space in which we will one day follow, the space in which we now follow is marked by the absence of Jesus' physical presence. Not by his absence as we saw last week, but by the absence of his physical presence. He is not here in the way that he was. He is not here in the way that he one day will be.

And we are now called to follow him in this space marked by the absence of his physical presence. And it is for that space that Jesus began to prepare his first disciples and us to go on living on that night before he went to the cross.

Review the circumstances with me. It was Thursday evening of Holy Week. Jesus and his disciples were sitting around a large wooden dining table in an upstairs apartment somewhere downtown Jerusalem.

[2 : 21] Because they had been looking forward to this time for a long time, emotions were running very deep that night. Indeed, in light of the things that Jesus had been saying to them in the recent days, their feelings were more acute than ever before.

Jesus began the evening by saying, I have earnestly desired. It's a strong emotion word that Jesus uses, denoting deep longing.

I have earnestly desired to eat this meal with you before I suffer. Before you suffer? How? Why? When? I've earnestly desired to eat this meal with you. For I say to you, I shall never eat it again until I eat it with you in the kingdom.

He then took a look for bread, gave thanks, broke it, handed it to them saying, this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.

[3 : 22] He then took a cup of wine, gave thanks, and handed it to his disciples saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood. Drink of it, all of you, in remembrance of me. And then came the great surprise, the shock.

He told them that very soon he was going to leave them, in a physical sense anyway, and that where he was going they could not follow, at least not yet.

He was returning to the place from which he had come. He was going home. He was going back to the Father. Jesus spends the rest of the evening then, preparing his disciples and us to go on living in the absence of his physical presence.

Now last Sunday, we listened to Jesus' promise that when he goes away, he will send in another. The another paraclete, as Jesus calls him.

It is to your advantage that I go away, he says, for when I go away, I will send the paraclete to you. I will send the Holy Spirit to you. I will send the helper, the comforter, the advocate, the one called in alongside, who will be with you forever and in you forever.

[4 : 39] Today, I invite you to listen to the promise Jesus made just before he promised the coming of the paraclete, the Spirit. It is a promise that the Spirit comes now to help us realize in this space between Jesus' coming.

John 14, verses 1 to 3. Do not be afraid. Trust in me. Trust in God. Trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms.

If it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me, that where I am, you may be also.

Now, the words of that text are clear enough. Are they not? There are no complicated, sophisticated words there. Although Jesus goes away, he promises to come back.

And his going away has a purpose. He is preparing a place for us in his Father's house. When everything is ready, he will return to take us to that place so that we might be with him.

[5 : 54] It's a wonderful promise. It's what the Apostle Paul calls the blessed hope. Jesus' physical absence is not forever. He is coming back for us.

And his physical absence has a purpose. He is preparing a place. Now, if that were all we heard in Jesus' words, it would be enough to sustain us in this space.

In this space between his first and second comings. But the fact is, that is not all to be heard in Jesus' words. If we had Jewish ears, we would hear a whole lot more.

A whole lot more. Now, this is the case with the Gospel of John generally. When we know something of a historical religious context in which Jesus speaks his words, his words, rich enough without knowing the context, become even richer.

You see, the words Jesus spoke at that tender moment during the Last Supper, echo words used in the Jewish marriage customs of the first century.

[7 : 06] When we understand something of those customs, we hear Jesus not only speaking of his second coming, but we hear him speaking about the purpose of his first coming, and the implications for discipleship between his comings.

And we gain a new perspective into the meaning and purpose of Holy Communion. Here we go. A Jewish marriage technically began long before the wedding day.

It began with a so-called betrothal ceremony, engagement ceremony, in which a covenant was established, in which a new covenant was established.

Here is how it worked. The perspective groom would leave his father's house and would travel, accompanied by his best man, to the perspective bride's home.

The groom would then finalize arrangements with the bride's father, in particular setting on a purchase price. In that time, the woman was bought with a price.

[8 : 15] Sorry about that, ladies. As soon as the groom paid the purchase price, the marriage technically went into effect. The man and woman were now legally husband and wife.

She was declared consecrated to him, set apart for him. Then this covenant was sealed by drinking a cup of wine, over which a betrothal benediction was pronounced.

After the conclusion of this betrothal ceremony, the groom would leave the bride's home and return to his father's home. He would be gone about 12 months.

During this separation time, the bride would prepare herself for the wedding, and during this separation time, the groom would prepare an apartment in his father's house. When I was in Israel, I had the privilege of meeting a young Jewish couple who had just been engaged.

We were in Jerusalem at the time. I got to be part of the engagement party. She was going to remain there in Jerusalem. He was going to return to Nazareth. I rode in his car from Jerusalem to Nazareth, and I still remember the joy as he spoke about going to my father's house to prepare a place.

[9 : 30] Although the bride and the groom did not live together during this period, they didn't even see each other during the betrothal period, they were nevertheless legally and spiritually bound to each other.

So binding is this betrothal agreement, this covenant, so binding that if the man died during this period, she was considered a widow. To break this betrothal agreement was the same as divorce. Now, you might know that it is during this betrothal period that Mary and Joseph discover that Jesus is pregnant. And this is why Joseph's first response is to quietly divorce Mary, because she has obviously nullified this covenant.

She has not been faithful. She's broken it. It takes a messenger from heaven to help Joseph believe what he wanted to believe about Mary, that she had not been unfaithful. It turns out that the child growing in her womb has been conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now, at the end of the betrothal period, the bridegroom, dressed in festive attire and accompanied by his friends, would make his way back to the bride's home.

[10:43] Although they had a rough idea about when he would come, they did not know the day or the hour. Usually, the bridegroom would arrive at night, adding to the sense of suspense. And his arrival would be preceded by the shout, Here is the bridegroom, come out to meet him.

And then, with great joy, the bride, veiled and accompanied by her maidens, would come out to join the groom and his attendants. And then the wedding would start.

The wedding itself began with a ceremony involving the verb take. The groom takes the bride from her home.

Thus, the Hebrew expression, take a bride. Okay. Go back now to that tender moment on that Thursday evening in the upper room.

Jesus takes a cup of wine, gives it to his disciples, saying, This cup is the new covenant in my blood. He then tells them that he is leaving. They cannot follow him right now.

[11:47] And then he says, Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. I am going there to prepare a place for you.

I will come back, and I will take you to myself. That where I am, you may be also. Do you hear what Jesus is saying about himself?

He thinks of himself as the bridegroom, as the great lover of the people of God. It is one of the most audacious claims Jesus of Nazareth could ever make.

For in the Old Testament, only the living God, Yahweh the Holy One, speaks this way. Isaiah 54, Do not be afraid, for your maker is your husband.

Hosea 2, speaking of unfaithful Israel, God says, She went after her lovers, but me she forgot. Therefore, I am now going to allure her.

[12:50] I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. In that day, declares the Lord, You will call me my husband. You will no longer call me my master. In that day, I will make a covenant with them.

I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and justice and loving kindness and compassion. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness, and then you will know that I am Yahweh.

In those tender moments in the upper room, Jesus reveals who he thinks he is. The great bridegroom. And Jesus reveals who he thinks we are.

His bride. Jesus thinks of us as his bride. Yes, we are his disciples. Gladly so.

Yes, we are citizens of his kingdom. Wonderfully, gratefully so. Yes, we are sheep of his pasture.

Yes, we are members of his body. Yes, we are his sisters and brothers.

[13:51] We are included in the inner life of the Trinity. But we are also his bride. We are his wife-to-be. He has made the long journey from his father's house to our house.

He has begun to woo himself to us. He's already held the betrothal ceremony. He's paid the purchase price for us, shedding his own blood.

He's sealed the agreement by drinking a cup of wine, declaring, this is the new covenant in my blood. He's given us an engagement ring. The paraclete.

The Holy Spirit. Who is the down payment. The foretaste. The first installment of life in the father's house. And he says to us, Do not be afraid. I've gone to prepare a place for you.

In my father's house. There are many rooms. And when I'm ready, I will come back. And I will take you to myself. That where I am, you may be also. That Jesus chose us to be his disciples is wonderful enough.

[14:56] Is it not? That he chose us to be members of his body? Glory. That he chose us to be sisters and brothers? Glory, glory.

That he chose us to be his bride? Lord, I love my children. I love my daughter-in-law and my son-in-law.

I love my mother. I love Sharon's parents. I love my four grandchildren. Say, have I shown you their pictures lately? But no one, no one, holds the place in my heart that my wife does.

We, the bride of the father's only begotten son, can it really be?

Yes, it can. And it is. And we are. Now, the apostle John, the author of this text, has actually been preparing us for this great fact in the way he composes his gospel.

[16:07] In John chapter 2, Jesus begins his public ministry. And where does he begin his public ministry? Anyone know? A wedding feast. A wedding feast in Cana of Galilee.

Is that just a coincidence? Or is this not a signal of why he has come into the world? In John chapter 3, John the Baptist, the prophet who prepares the way for Jesus, speaks of himself as what?

Anyone know? The friend of the bridegroom. As John the Baptist watches people begin to flock to Jesus, he says, 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.

John the Baptist sees these people flocking to Jesus and rejoices that the bridegroom is now gathering in his bride. And then, in John chapter 4, the story of the woman at the well.

If you know the larger biblical story, if you know the Old Testament, you know that there are a number of women at the well stories. Now, what happens to these women at every single women at the well story?

[17:24] They are being chosen to be somebody's wife. Abraham's servant finds a wife for Isaac at the well, Rebecca. Jacob finds a wife at a well, Rachel.

Moses finds a wife at a well. In John chapter 4, Jesus meets a woman at the well. He asks her to go get her husband. I have no husband, she says.

Now she does. Now she does. Is not the Samaritan woman at the well the first of those whom the Father is calling to be his son's bride?

The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord. She is his new creation by water and the word. From heaven, he came and sought her to be his holy bride.

Living in the wonder of this understanding of our relationship with Jesus has many wonderful implications like intimacy.

[18:35] The bride image speaks of deep intimacy. Jesus says to the first century church in the first century city of Laodicea, words you know well, Behold, I stand at the door and knock.

If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into you and eat with you and you with me. Those words, I stand and knock and open the door, echo words from the song of Solomon, the great love poem of the Old Testament.

Chapter 5, verse 2, A voice, my beloved was knocking, open to me, my sister, my darling, my dove, my perfect one. Our desire for Jesus, as strong as it might be, is nothing compared with his desire for us.

Intimacy. And security. A deep sense of security. For the bridegroom has sealed this marriage certificate with his own blood.

He is committed to us for better or worse as long as we both shall live. Which means, get this, that when the worst in me comes out, and it does, I need not fear losing him.

[19:56] He's not a starry-eyed lover. He does not ignore or close his eyes to the blemishes he sees in me or you when he calls us to himself. He saw the worst in me when he proposed.

He's not going to be surprised by any wrinkles in me. He sees them all, even all of those that I do not see. Which means, Jesus will never discover something about me or you that will make him want to cancel the covenant.

You and I will never hear Jesus say, like Daryl, if I had known that about you, I would have never entered into relationship. He chose us just as we are and will stay with us for better or for worse. Living out this image of our relationship with Jesus gives us greater motivation to remain loyal to him. We are his bride.

We don't want to be fooling around with other lords and other lovers. The true lover keeps calling us to exclusive devotion.

[21:10] His call is grounded partly in his realization that every other Lord is going to let us down. Every other lover will finally let us down. And his call is also grounded in the fact that he wants exclusive devotion from us.

So he is wooing us in countless ways. He woos us through our conscience. He woos us through all of these love letters he has written to us. When he comes he does not want us to be found in another lover's bed.

He calls us to loyalty. Living out this image of our relationship with Jesus gives us greater reason to endure the difficult times between his comings.

Because now we see these difficulties differently. We see them as part of the process by which the bridegroom is helping us get ready for the wedding. He is using these difficulties to remove the spots and to get out the wrinkles.

He is actively working in us to be able to present us to himself as a bride as Paul puts it having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing but that she should be holy and blameless.

[22 : 25] He is using the difficulties to help us become more like him so that we reflect his beauty and grace and wisdom and gentleness. Living with this image of our relationship with Jesus simplifies the challenges of discipleship.

By simplify I do not mean make easy. I just mean it clarifies it. It keeps bringing us to the essential. Simplicity beyond complexity as they put it. Because living out this image disencumbers our overbooked lives.

As a bride we will do whatever it takes to stay in love and to grow in intimacy with him. I still remember those days when I was first I had first fallen in love with Jesus with Sharon.

I remember the days when I first fell in love with Jesus too. But I remember the days when I first fell in love with Sharon. Remarkably I had all kinds of time for her. The apostle Paul says to the Corinthians I'm jealous for you with a godly jealousy for I betroth you to one husband that is to Christ that I might present you as a pure virgin but I'm afraid lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness your mind should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Jesus.

And living with this image of our relationship with Jesus will keep us alive in longing for his coming because when you are in love you long for the presence of the beloved.

[24 : 01] The early church was madly in love which is why they anticipated his appearing anytime. Someone has said those who love him best long for him most.

And living with this image of being the bride of Jesus gives us another window into holy communion. In this meal we are reaffirming betrothal vows.

Our bridegroom reaffirms his betrothal covenant over the uplifted cup in the presence of all Jesus says this cup is the new covenant in my blood.

I love you. You are mine in joy and in sorrow and sickness and in health as long as we both shall live. you are mine and I give you myself. And we as his bride-to-be accept the marriage proposal again.

As we take the bread and take the wine as we eat and drink we are saying yes Jesus I welcome your love yes I am no longer my own I have been bought with a price I am gladly yours.

[25 : 13] do not be afraid in my father's house there are many rooms I'm going to prepare a place for you and when I have prepared that place I will come and I will take you to myself so that you may be where I am also so come let us gather around the table where the lover of our souls takes us to his greatest act of love and let us do so by singing hymn number 211 oh the deep deep love of Jesus vast unmeasured boundless free rolling as a mighty ocean in its fullness over me underneath me all around me is the current of thy love