

# The Church Is A Bride

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Please turn with me to Ephesians chapter 5 tonight. We are going to conclude the short series that we've been doing called Pictures of the Church. Over the past couple of months in our evening services we've been looking at five images for the Church and we have a list here. First of all we looked at the Church as a pillar, then as a farm, then as a body, then as a mother and the last step is as a bride. These images are all helping us understand the nature, functioning and priorities of the Church and it's such an important thing to think about because as we said at the very start of the series throughout her history the Christian Church has been greatly harmed by two things. The Church has been misunderstood by people outside of her and the Church has been misrepresented by people within her. And for both of these reasons whether we're Christians or not, whatever our background, however whether we're new to the Church or been here for years it's immensely important that we have a clear biblical understanding of what the Church is and of what God wants it to do. So tonight we come to the final part of our series. The Church is a bride. Like all of the other images and this picture is telling us something very important about the Church just to recap the pillar shows us the Church's grounding, its foundation, the fact that it simultaneously stands on the truth in Jesus Christ and it 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 functioning. That's how she works, like a body, many different parts all connected 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 tonight the bride image is showing us the Church's destiny.

Please turn to Ephesians 5. I want to read again at verse 31. 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'm saying that it refers to Christ and the Church. This image of the Church of God's people as a bride is one that runs right through the whole of the Bible. It's foreshadowed in the Old Testament where Israel was portrayed both as a precious bride and yet as one that was tragically adulterous. It's revealed in the New Testament when the bridegroom comes and the Church is called to be his bride. But its ultimate fulfillment lies in the future. The Church as bride is an eschatological reality. It's to do with the end times and the final chapters of Revelation describe the glorious marriage supper of the Lamb. And for these reasons there's 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. And so I want us to look at that together tonight and I want us to focus particularly on what the bridegroom does for his Church and we're going to focus on five things. Number one, the bridegroom clings to his bride. Verse 31 that you can see before you is repeating the great marriage mandate of Genesis chapter 2. These words express the beauty of a marriage bond, the fact that a man will leave his parents and he will hold fast to his wife and the two will become one. So Paul is talking about marriage but as Paul often does he just throws in a wee statement that contains astounding truth. And what he tells us here is that this union of bridegroom and bride is exactly what happens in the relationship between Christ and the Church. Now this is important because it's pointing us to what I think is really the overarching doctrine of Christian salvation.

[ 4 : 46 ] If you think of all the big doctrines, the big theological words that make up Christian theology, there's many of them, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance. If you think of all of them, which one's the most important? Well I think the answer to that question is that the most important is union with Christ. And the reason I think that's the most important one is because all the other doctrines, justification, adoption, sanctification, they're all an outworking of the fact that if you are a Christian or if you become a Christian you are united to Jesus Christ by faith.

And that's why Paul's favourite way to describe a Christian is to say that we are in Christ. The Church is united to Jesus Christ just as a husband is united to his wife. That means that all the benefits, resources, achievements and status of Jesus Christ are now shared with us.

Nearly 20 years ago when Yuna was united to me in marriage, she gained a rightful share in my collection of mixed tapes in the car. Now for those of you who can remember what that was we'll know what a privilege that was for my dear wife. Now some of you will be too young to even know what a tape is. When you are united to Jesus by faith you are given the right to share in his righteousness, in his presence, his brotherhood, his grace and above all his love. As bright the Church is united to Jesus. But that union has a very important implication attached to it.

It speaks of Christ's utterly unfailing faithfulness to his bride. The biblical ideal for marriage is a relationship of absolute faithfulness. That's what marriage is meant to be.

Tragically it's often not like that and that's incredibly tough for anyone who ever experiences that. But although we can fail, Jesus never does and a key biblical truth is that Christ's faithfulness to his bride is absolute and that's a great reminder that he'll never grow cold on you.

[ 7 : 24 ] He'll never have his head turned. He'll never lose interest in you. He will never ever break your heart.

Instead Jesus is the most faithful bridegroom. He's committed, he's loyal, he's determined, he's dependable. In Jesus' eyes you are impossible to walk away from. Now that's amazing but what makes it even more amazing is the fact that although the bridegroom, Jesus, is the pinnacle of faithfulness, his bride is the complete opposite. The love story of the Bible is not a Hollywood romance where the perfect guy meets the perfect girl and it all comes together and they live happily ever after in this perfect relationship. The love story of the Bible is a perfect bridegroom who is repeatedly betrayed by his unfaithful wife. That truth is powerfully emphasized in the Old Testament especially in the prophets. You'll remember that one of the key aspects of the prophet's job was to be warning men. So when they spoke it was usually because things were going wrong and the people were turning away from God. And if you go to Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel,

Hosea they all describe Israel as an unfaithful bride. Sometimes they do so in quite shocking language but the imagery reflects what was actually happening. Israel was meant to be faithful to God but they continually turned away from him and ran off with other gods and you'd think that God said it's over. We're finished. And yet the astonishing thing is that God does the complete opposite. And this truth is captured in what's probably my favorite version the whole of the Old Testament. I'm not sure if you're allowed to have favorite versions but if you are allowed then this is definitely one of my favorites. Hosea is a prophecy all about the unfaithfulness of God's people and it's revealed through the unfaithfulness of Hosea's own wife.

And yet as God speaks through this whole situation in chapter 11 he says something incredible about Israel. He says, how can I give up on you? How can I hand you over? 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 as Christians or if we become Christians even though we're broken, even though we failed, even though God could find a thousand reasons to dump us, he never will. Instead he clings to you. As Paul says, he holds fast to his wife.

[ 10 : 45 ] Now isn't that incredible because I look at myself and I can find so many reasons why I think God want to push me away and keep me at a distance. Maybe you feel the same. The truth is God wants to cling to you. He wants to hold you and he'll never ever let you go.

And the practical consequence of that in terms of a religious devotion is that we're spoken for if we're Christians. So when you struggle with doubts in your faith, remember that you're spoken for and that your bridegroom is holding you fast no matter how many doubts you have. When social pressure around you from colleagues or friends or culture is telling you to compromise, remember that you're spoken for. When Satan dangles something in front of you that's attractive but you know it's wrong, remember that you're spoken for. And when feelings of low self-esteem leave your hopes and assurances high by a thread, remember that it's a theological fact that you're spoken for. You're his and he is never letting you go. The bridegroom clings to his bride. Second thing is that the bridegroom delights in his bride. This delight is described beautifully in Isaiah chapter 62. Let me read these verses. You shall no more be turned forsaken and your land shall no more be turned desolate. But you shall be called my delight as 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 a bridegroom rejoices over the bride so shall your

God rejoice over you. Jesus delights in the church as his bride. It's a great reminder that Jesus is not a bridegroom who is being forged. He's a bridegroom who is delighted. Now there's many reasons for that. I just want to highlight two of them. First the bridegroom delights in his bride because she has a role in his life. Now from the very beginning of the Bible the bridegroom's bride has had a role in his life. Eve was created to be Adam's helper. She was made to be perfect for him and ever since wives have been alongside husbands helping them and supporting them and that means that the church as Christ's bride has a role in his life. So the church serves Jesus. The church the church accomplishes things for Jesus. The church is given responsibilities by Jesus. The church has duties to undertake for Jesus. Now that doesn't mean for a second that the church is Jesus's slave. No bride is ever a slave but it does mean that the church is a key part of the life of the husband. Now that is astounding because you must never forget that at one level God doesn't need you.

God is completely self-sufficient. God is independent in that sense. He doesn't need us and yet the love of God is so great that he's opened that love out so that you can have a place in it too and that means that you are needed. It means that you have a crucial role in the life of Jesus.

He needs you alongside him. He needs you working for him here in Carlyway. So Jesus has people who need to be fed both physically and spiritually. He has infants that need to be raised. He has a household that needs to be kept safe. He's got a harvest that needs to be gathered. He's got a message that needs to be spread. Who is the most important helper in all of that? His bride, the church.

[ 15 : 10 ] So the bridegroom delights in his bride because she's got a role in his life but the second reason he delights in his bride is because she's beautiful. Paul points towards this in verses 26 to 27.

We can pop them up on the screen. He says, Husbands love your wives as Christ of the church and gave himself up for it, 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.

She's without spot or wrinkle. Now you might think Thomas you're contradicting yourself because a few minutes ago you said that the church was 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 as these verses say he's cleansing us, renewing us, he wipes away every blemish and stain, he heals every wound and scar. Now it's very important that we make sure that we don't think of the church's beauty in a way that's the wrong way around and it's easy to do because when we think of beauty we very often think of putting stuff on, don't we? So people you know will put on makeup, they'll do their hair, they'll put on nails, they'll put on jewelry and often we can think that a bride is made beautiful by putting stuff on and all of that's fine and totally okay but with the church it's the opposite.

The church is made beautiful not by putting on but by washing off. That's what verse 26 is saying, you can see it there, that the splendor comes through washing.

That means that the church as bride is made beautiful not by covering herself in things to make her look good but by washing off all the muck and stain and damage of sin and this is so important to remember because it means that Jesus doesn't look at you and think I need to change her and make her beautiful. No, he says I need to cleanse her because underneath all that mess she is beautiful. It's reminding us that all the stain and ugliness of sin in us and in the world around us is a horrible intrusion that's not meant to be there. We're not made ugly, we were made beautiful. Sin has ruined it but Jesus wants to come and fix it and to restore us. That's all of that means that what Jesus wants is the real you. He doesn't want a makeover bride, he wants a pure one, he wants the person you really are, the person made to bear the image of God, the person who is the work of God's own hands, the person who in God's sight is just so beautiful. The church as bride is beautiful. She's been transformed from the ugliness of sin back into the pure beauty that she was always meant to have and for us as we live our lives as Christians it's so important to recognize this because that's exactly what the world around us needs to see. The world around us, the people you work with, the people in your family, the people who see you and see me, they need to see that we are being transformed from brokenness to beauty. The bridegroom delights in his bride, the marriage of the Christ bridegroom and the church bride is a wedding full of abounding joy and perhaps the most precious truth in all of that is that it proves to you that you are wanted.

[ 19 : 55 ] Maybe you've been overlooked, forgotten, used or rejected and all of those things are awful to experience with Jesus you are so, so wanted because the bridegroom delights in his bride.

Number three, the bridegroom protects his bride. This is taught to us in verses 24 and then in 28 and 29. Now as the church submits to Christ so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands and in verse 28 the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies, he who loves his wife loves himself or no one ever hated his own flesh but nourishes and cherishes it just as Christ does the church because we're members of his body. One of the great effects that Christianity has had on human civilization is that it's transformed the status of women.

Today in culture where Christianity has had a historical influence men and women are treated equally or at least there's an expectation that they should be that is a direct result of the gospel's influence on a society. The fact that women get the same education, the same votes, the same rights and privileges men are all a result of Christianity's influence and if you don't believe that then just go to a country that hasn't had a strong Christian influence and see if women are treated the same as we are. Incidentally I may have said this before but there's a wonderful piece of free church history here in terms of women's rights. I can't remember the exact date when universal suffrage was granted in Britain about 1920-ish you can correct me if I'm wrong but that was the time with the suffragettes. Women were given the vote in terms of parliament around 1920 but when it came to electing ministers when were women given the vote in the free church?

1843 we were well ahead of the game so that's very encouraging indeed. All of this is important for this study because for women in the New Testament it was nothing like that.

Women were incredibly vulnerable in the days when Paul wrote this letter and their status, safety and sustenance were all very dependent on getting married.

[ 22 : 36 ] That meant that a key part of the bridegroom's role was to protect his wife. That's why the language of submission that you see here which we can understand today sounds you know oppressive, it's not oppressive at all in fact it's the opposite of oppression. The language of submission means that the wife is coming under the husband's authority and coming under his responsibility and the result of that was that you are brought under his care, his provision and his protection.

In biblical times a husband was key to a woman's safety, security and prosperity and that's why the New Testament gives such strict instructions to husbands because their wives depended on them and so they had to love their wives to the highest standard. All of that is teaching us that the church as bride is protected by her husband and Jesus does that in lots of ways.

He does it by instructing us, his commandments are there for us to keep, to protect us from harm and you must never forget that listening to Jesus and obeying Jesus is not going to spoil your life, it's going to prevent you from spoiling your life. Jesus protects us by instructing us.

Jesus protects us by nourishing us and he does that in lots of ways through the Bible, through sacraments, through Christian community, through personal devotion in all these ways Jesus nourishes us. Jesus protects us by holding us close to him. That word cherished that you can see in verse 29 is an absolutely beautiful word because it basically means to make something warm and it's telling you that Jesus wants to draw you near and hold you close and keep you warm.

So often we feel that in our Christian lives we are cold and because we're cold we should stay away. That's never true. Jesus says if you are cold come close and I will warm you up.

[ 24 : 49 ] And the fact that Jesus wants to protect you is because to him you are so precious and in a world that crushes our self-esteem whether it's at work or through social media or in our relationships we need to remember the theological truth that in Jesus's eyes you are so precious.

The bridegroom protects his bride. Number four, the last two are very brief. Number four, the bridegroom dies for his bride. This is where we see just how precious the bride really is.

Often when we think about weddings we think of joyful happy wonderful occasions but I am sure every father of the bride in this congregation knows that weddings also come at a cost don't they?

Today many of those costs maybe aren't always necessary but they're there nonetheless. In biblical times the cost was actually necessary. There was a bridal price that had to be paid by the girl's father. You would write Jacob and Genesis you see an example of that paid to the bride's father not by the bride's father paid to the bride's father but even though even if those costs are high there's nothing nothing compared to the cost that was paid by the church's bridegroom.

Verse 25 shows that says husbands loved 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.

[ 26 : 38 ] The cost of this wedding was the cross and through that death the bride is rescued, cleansed, restored, healed and united to her husband forever and it's reminding us what we said already this is not a forged marriage this is a marriage where the bridegroom makes a choice and Jesus knowing the cost, knowing the pain, knowing the horror of the cross he looks at you, he looks at his bride and he says she's worth it and that's why our whole hearted devotion to our bridegroom to Jesus is the only right response to his astounding devotion to us. So we've said four things so far we've said that the bridegroom clings to his bride the bridegroom delights in his bride the bridegroom protects his bride the bridegroom dies for his bride the last thing I'm going to say is that the bridegroom comes for his bride.

As we said at the start the image of the church as bride is ultimately talking about the church's destiny so yes we are all united to Jesus as our husband now through faith and so there's a sense in which it's already through but there's also a not yet aspect to this relationship the fullness of this marriage union lies ahead of us in the future and that is described so beautifully in the words of Revelation 21 then I saw a new heaven and a 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 the 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 they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God he'll wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore for the former things have passed away when Jesus comes back the church will enjoy perfect union with her bridegroom then our maker really will be our husband then we will enjoy all the best that our bridegroom can give and above all then we will be with him forever and all of that means that right now we're waiting but the great closing message of the bible is that the bridegroom is coming for his bride he's coming for you and so we're waiting and that's why in Revelation 22 17 the spirit and the bride say come and when he comes what's he gonna do he will wipe away every tear that means all the pain of sin-spoiled love is going to be healed all the hurts of singleness of broken marriage of widowhood of heartbreak all the agony that these things cause will be healed all the tears will be wiped away the bridegroom has gone to prepare a place for you but the bridegroom is coming back for you but the question arises why hasn't he come yet well I think it's because the bride isn't ready not in the sense that she isn't beautiful enough not at all but not ready in the sense that parts of the bride are missing in other words parts of the church is missing which part is the people who aren't yet trusting in Jesus and so if you're not yet a Christian that's you and that brings us to the final thing that we need to remember the church is a bride that means that the bride is us we are the bride all of us together and this is where we see how important our collective love for one another is as a church often we'll hear statements like Jesus loves me or Jesus loves you and these are beautiful through wonderful statements but they're not the ultimate theological truth when it comes to his love because the ultimate theological truth is not Jesus loves

me the ultimate theological truth is Jesus loves us together the pinnacle of his love is not for me as an individual it's for us together as his bride and if we could just remember that then it would make us the community of love and care and unity that the church is meant to be so that's the church in pictures the church is a pillar standing for him not wobbling or shifting to and through the church is a farm we are workers not customers the church is a body every part has its place we must not be dislocated we must never be self-harming the church is a mother not a machine we need to be maternal not mechanical or managerial and the church is a bride not a spoiled demanding diva but a beautiful obedient united bride please God make us a church like that let's pray Father we thank you so much for Jesus our bridegroom we thank you for the price that he paid to make us his and we marvel at the greatness of your love but we also recognize that we don't know the half of it and we just thank you so much for everything that you've done for us please draw us all closer to one another and closer to you and today tonight again we the bride say come let's have