

THE WEDDING BANQUET
April 20, 2008/La Paz, Mexico/Pastor Joyce Anderson-Reed

This past week as I was reflecting and praying about what message God would have me bring to you today, I was reminded of how many of you are getting ready to leave La Paz, and as you do, are returning to very difficult situations. Some of these burdens involve your family, others medical needs, some with your churches back in the states or Canada, and I thought, “God, what do these brothers and sisters need to stand firm, to persevere in these situations.” And he replied, “Give them a glimpse of heaven. Remind them that this is not their home. Glory is up ahead, just around the corner!” So the sermon this morning is for all of us who need to retouch that promise of what is to come! Turn with me to the book of Revelation.

Revelation 19:4-9

The 24 elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God, who was seated on the throne. And they cried: “Amen and hallelujah!”

Then a voice came from the throne, saying:

“Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, both small and great!”

Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of washing waters and like loud peals of thunder shouting:

“Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns,
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.”

Then the angel said to me, “Write, ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’” And he added, “These are the true words of God.”

For those of you who have ever helped to coordinate a wedding, whether it was your own, your son or daughter’s, or that of a friend’s, you know firsthand that it’s a lot of work! Picking a date, reserving the location, choosing the invitations, making the guest list, shopping for a dress, renting tuxedos, flowers, music, photographer, menus . . . the details are endless. And sometimes the only thing

that keeps you from going under, that makes all this planning worthwhile, is the anticipation of what it will be like. The anticipation of a grand celebration!

That's what this passage in Revelation is all about: a grand celebration! The Wedding Banquet. It is our upcoming wedding to Christ. Now this idea of the relationship between God and his people as a marriage goes far back into the Old Testament. Again and again the prophets thought of Israel as the chosen bride of God.

I will betroth you to me for ever. (Hosea 2:19)

Your Maker is your husband, the lord of hosts is his name. (Isaiah 54:5)

The marriage symbolism runs all through the Gospels as well:

We read of the marriage feast, the bride chamber and the wedding garments in Matthew 22. We read about the bridegroom in Mark 2. The Friends of the bridegroom in John 3. And the Apostle Paul uses betrothal language to describe the Church like a pure virgin being promised to Christ in 2 Corinthians.

This might seem like a strange metaphor for God to use. And yet, if we think about the dynamics of what a wedding implies: love, intimate communion, fidelity and joy, then the analogy starts to make perfect sense. (Barclay, *Revelation*, pages 172-173)

The image of the wedding banquet or the wedding feast is also steeped in Old Testament literature. The Jews had the idea that when the Messiah came, God's people would be entertained by God at a great banquet. This idea was translated into the New Testament as the Marriage Feast of the Lamb. It is the beautiful image of the people of God being offered the bounty of God in his Kingdom. (Barclay, *Revelation*, page 175)

So how will this great event, this Wedding Feast begin? With a very important word: Hallelujah!

This is the keynote word in the praise of the multitude in heaven. "Praise Ye the Lord!" is what it literally means in Greek. Hallelujah!

Our Wedding Feast with God will begin with praise and worship of Him. We will join with brothers and sisters in Christ from around the world, and shout Hallelujah to our God! Just imagine that for a moment. Shoulder to shoulder with Christians

not only from Mexico, Canada and the United States, but also from Europe, Russia, China, Ecuador, the Caribbean, Iraq, the Sudan . . . from every corner of the globe we will be gathered. Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

John Piper in his book *90 Minutes in Heaven* describes what he heard and saw in heaven when he was clinically dead for 90 minutes after being crushed in a car accident. This is what he shares about the music:

Even today, the single, most vivid memory I have of my entire heavenly experience is what I call the music, but it was different from anything I had ever heard or expect to hear on earth. The melodies of praise filled the atmosphere. The nonstop intensity and endless variety overwhelmed me. The praise was unending, but the most remarkable thing to me was that hundreds of songs were being sung at the same time—all of them worshipping God. As I approached the large, magnificent gate, I heard them from every direction and realized that each voice praised God. I write voice, but it was more than that. Some sounded instrumental, but I wasn't sure—and I wasn't concerned. Praise was everywhere, and all of it was musical, yet comprised of melodies and tones I'd never experienced before.

“Hallelujah! Praise! Glory to God! Praise to the King!” Such words rang out in the midst of all the music. I don't know if the angels were singing them or if they came from humans. I felt so awestruck, so caught up in the heavenly mood that I didn't look around. My heart filled with the deepest joy I've ever experienced.

. . . I heard old hymns and choruses along with hundreds of songs I had never heard before. Hymns of praise, modern sounding choruses, and ancient chants filled my ears and brought not only a deep peace but the greatest feeling of joy I've ever experienced. I later realized that I didn't hear such songs as “The Old Rugged Cross” or “The Nail-Scarred Hand.” None of the hymns that filled the air were about Jesus' sacrifice or death. I heard no sad songs and instinctively knew that there are no sad songs in heaven. Why would there be? All were praises about Christ's reign as King of Kings, and our joyful worship for all he has done for us and how wonderful he is.

. . . I would have expected the most memorable experience of my time in heaven to be something I had seen or the physical embrace of a loved one. Yet above everything else, I cherish those sounds and at times I think: I can't wait to hear them again, in person. It's what I look forward to. I want to hear those continuous songs of praise. (Piper, pages 30-33)

Brothers and Sisters, when today weighs you down. When all you hear is discouraging words, harsh yelling, or even profanity . . . close your eyes and imagine the music of heaven. Praise and worship for our God. Unlike any music you'll ever hear on this earth. This is what awaits each one of us as we anticipate the wedding banquet God is preparing for us, his children.

To fully understand the Wedding Banquet, we also need to know about some of the components of a Jewish wedding, because that is the context of the imagery found in the Hebrew Scriptures, as well as for John, the Hebrew author of the book of Revelation.

Now, I will pause for a moment, and say that all this talk of brides and weddings is probably a bit more fascinating and easier to relate to for the women sitting here this morning than the men. But men, remember—especially for those of you who are married—that in the book of Ephesians husbands are instructed to love their wives as Christ loved the church, his bride. So this passage has merit for both men and women.

In ancient Hebrew tradition, the actual wedding arrangements were the responsibility of the groom and his father. They even pick out her dress! Which is why our passage says in verse 8, “Fine linen was given her to wear.” Now, while this might strike terror in us women today: the thought of our father and the groom arranging the details of the wedding, it was the custom for an orthodox Jewish girl. That’s why in Judges 14:10, when it speaks of Samson’s wedding, it says, “Now his father went down to see the woman.” Or, you might recall how Abraham arranged the marriage of his son Isaac in the book of Genesis.

What does this mean for you and me, the body of Christ, also know as Christ’s Bride? Christ identifies himself as our Bridegroom. It means that Jesus has gone before us to prepare the wedding ceremony and the wedding feast. He is anticipating our arrival in heaven. He is taking care of every detail. It actually gives those familiar words in John 14 a whole new level of significance: “I go to prepare a place for you that where I am you may be also. And I’m going to come and get you.”

A Jewish wedding also includes a ketubah, which is a contract that the groom and two witnesses sign. The bride has nothing to do with it. The groom is making a binding oath to his bride. And during the ceremony the groom has to speak aloud to all the listeners his commitment to this woman and how sacred she is to him.

And what would be Christ's oath to us, his bride? His death on the cross. By the shedding of his blood, our sins are forgiven, we are made white as snow, we can once again don the pure linen designed for the Bride, and come before our God holy and without blemish. The sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross, witnessed by God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, was Jesus saying to the entire world, "I love you. I am yours, beloved. And you are mine."

So what is the bride doing if she doesn't have to prepare the ceremony or the banquet? She is making herself ready. Her only responsibility is to prepare herself for her groom. To prepare herself in purity.

Psalm 45:10 says, "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."

Let that thought sink in a minute: The King is enthralled with you! As we grow in Christ, we become more and more beautiful to the One for whom we are preparing ourselves. Ephesians 5 says that He is presenting us without spot or wrinkle. 2 Corinthians 11:2 says that we will be presented to our groom as pure virgins. For any of us with difficult backgrounds or a shameful track record, this is great news!

Author and Bible Study teacher Beth Moore shares in her book *Breaking Free* how God redeemed her from a life of brokenness and promiscuity. Many years later, she was preparing for her 20th wedding anniversary and what type of special gift to get for her husband. She prayed and prayed to God about it. Listen to her story:

God began suggesting something to my heart. He started bringing to my mind the early part of our marriage and the pain of my wedding day. It was an extremely hard day for me. I don't know how to explain it to you. I didn't understand it until many, many years later. I was feeling so much shame on my wedding day because it was a day I was supposed to feel beautiful. And I did not feel beautiful.

I had even gone to a lot of trouble to make absolutely sure that I had an off-white dress instead of a white dress because I did not want to be a lie. Now some of you are already hurting because you know what I'm talking about. It's a horrible feeling. Nothing about that day seemed beautiful to me.

When I was a little girl, I had pictured that when I got married I would have a huge wedding portrait, and it would hang over our blazing fireplace. And I didn't even have enough money for a photographer. I just spent the bare minimum. I

didn't even buy my dress; I just rented it. You know, it just was not the kind of day you picture.

So as I contemplated our 20th anniversary, the Lord began scratching that a little bit. He said, "You know, Beth," and of course He was speaking to my heart, "you never did get that picture made."

"What picture?"

"That wedding portrait."

"Well, it's a little too late!"

"Who said?"

And the Lord put it on my heart that it was time. He said, "My darlin' we have done so much work. And I have restored you. And it is time for you to put on a white wedding gown and get your picture taken for your husband."

I called a friend of mine who's a makeup artist in Houston, and swore her to secrecy. She said, "I'll set up everything. You show up and I'll have everything ready." And that's exactly what I did. And I'm going to tell you something. She hid me in a room and would not let me see a mirror. She had my dress sparkling white from head to toe. Zipped that thing up nice and tight. Did my makeup. Did my hair. Put on my veil. Then she pulled me out and brought me in front of a mirror. And I nearly died.

I couldn't even recognize myself. The photographer was so tender that his eyes continually filled with tears. I had the picture framed in the most ornate gold frame, 20 x 24. I had one made for each of my daughters as well. I wrote the same letter to all three of them, explaining what the portrait meant to me.

The night of our anniversary, I had the girls stay with us, and I presented Keith with that picture and then gave the girls theirs. And they all read their letters at the same time. My husband is a tall man, very handsome, and he began to weep. He stood up with that picture, and he began walking all over the house, holding it up to places on the wall.

He would stop at one place and shake his head no, then stop at another and shake his head no. Finally he walked right over to a particular part of the wall. The

girls and I went, “uhh,” and caught our breath because we knew what he was looking at. He set the picture down. He took a deep breath to gather the courage, and then he pulled his trophy deer off the wall.

As I live and breathe, he had tears streaming down his cheeks and I thought, “He’s crying over the deer.” He hung that picture up right there, and it still hangs there today. He stepped back and said, “That is the trophy of my life.” That is a restored bride.

And that is what every single one of us can be, fully restored, fully prepared. Are we going to believe God or not? (Moore, pages 307-309)

Another part of the Jewish bride’s preparation in purity is involved in a special bath of clean water and fragrant oil. The water is considered not just clean water, but also Living Water. Water to prepare you for your new life.

Remember what Jesus said to the woman at the well? “Whoever drinks the water I give will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” (John 4:14) And what is our theme here at Crossroads? Sharing the Living Water of Jesus Christ with thirsty people. Living Water is a crucial step for the Bride as she prepares for the coming of her groom.

Then the bride chooses fine jewelry to wear. The jewelry represents her readiness for the groom. And often this jewelry was given to her by the groom and his family. Jeremiah 2:32 says, “Does a maiden forget her jewelry, a bride her wedding ornaments?” She wore her best jewelry as part of her wedding attire.

What jewelry can we wear as we prepare for the coming of our bridegroom, Jesus? He told us that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord Your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself. So adorning ourselves in the love of Christ is one way we can be ready. And what about the fruits of the Spirit? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? (Galatians 5:22) Do these jewels adorn your wedding garment as you anticipate the coming of Jesus?

A Jewish Wedding is steeped in joy. You are expected to have great gladness of heart. In fact, no mourning is allowed. If you were in mourning, you couldn’t come to a Jewish wedding. Revelation 19:7 says, “Let us rejoice and be glad/and give him glory!/For the wedding of the Lamb has come.”

Rejoice and glad in Greek mean to exult. To have joyful exuberance! To leap for joy. To skip or dance. Excessive joy. Ecstatic joy and delight. This is going to be some kind of wedding! Isaiah 62:5 says, “As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.”

God is going to rejoice over you and be enthralled by your beauty. Isaiah describes it like this:

On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples,

A banquet of aged wine---the best of meats and the finest of wines.

On this mountain he will destroy the shroud the enfolds all peoples,

The sheet that covers all nations;

He will swallow up death forever.

The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces;

He will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth.

The Lord has spoken.

In that day they will say:

“Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us.

This is the Lord, we trusted in him;

Let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.” (Isaiah 25:6-9)

Do you see what those verses say? After all that’s been so challenging and difficult for us on this earth, do you realize that when everything is said and done, all that will matter is that we trusted in Him? That we’d be able to say, when see Him face-to-face, “There is my God, and I trusted in Him.” (Moore, pages 312-313)

Whatever is going on in your life today is only temporary. The pain, the struggle, the hardship, the worry . . . it *really* won’t last forever. If you are in Christ, then this earth is not your home. Heaven is just around the corner. A wedding banquet is being prepared in your honor. All you have to do is trust, and be ready.

Let’s pray . . .

Dear God, sometimes we find it incredible to believe that you delight in us, that you rejoice in us. You look at us covered by the sanctifying blood of Jesus, and no longer see our sin. We are now without stain, without blemish. Lord, grow in us a desire to be prepared for the wedding feast that awaits us. May we practice love daily. May we adorn ourselves in the fruits of the Spirit. We await your coming. We anticipate heaven. Come, Lord Jesus, Come. Amen.

Resources:

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