

We are the Bride of Christ

DAVE BAST

In the story of Aladdin and his magic lamp, Aladdin is granted three wishes. Imagine a magic genie suddenly appeared before you and said you could have anything you wanted. Would you know what to wish for? Would what you wished for be what you really wanted? That is one of the things we want to think about today on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and we have come now, Scott, to the second program in a series of five that we are doing on images of the Church from the Bible, primarily the New Testament, but there is also some Old Testament background to these wonderful metaphors, we could call them, or pictures of who we are as followers of Jesus Christ. So, we are the body of Christ. We looked at that one, which is probably familiar to many; and today we want to think about what it means to be the bride of Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and this is an important image that comes up frequently...and we will see that in this program...in the New Testament; but before we get into that, we want to go to the Old Testament, as you just said, Dave; because this idea of the people of God—the Church—as the bride ties in very much with the people of God—Israel—who were often in the Old Testament compared to a spouse; a betrothed person to Yahweh, the God of Israel, or a wife; and so, here are some verses from Deuteronomy 7, from very, very early on in Israel's history, where we read:

⁶For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the earth to be his people—his treasured possession. ⁷It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples. ⁸It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.

DAVE BAST

Wonderful, wonderful and profound passage, which says essentially God has chosen us...he has chosen us to belong to himself...to be his people the way, maybe, a husband would choose a bride or a bride her husband; and if you ask why did he do this? The answer is not because you were so great—not because you were so handsome—not because you were so smart—not because you were so rich. Why? He did it because of love. You cannot get behind that. If you ask why did God save anyone—why does he save anyone? The answer is because he is love.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes...

DAVE BAST

It is love.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Very intimate language there in Deuteronomy 7. He has set his heart on you. He chose you. That is how lovers talk to each other: Oh, you've captured my heart, my dear. I give you my heart. This is romantic language. As you said, Dave, it is very much reminiscent of how we talk about our spouses and how we talk about marriage; but of course, when we are led down that path...when I give you my heart...when I set my heart on you...when we do that as men and women who become husband and wife, then the next obviously very important component is faithfulness.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you cannot have a healthy marriage or a healthy relationship without mutual faithfulness; and sadly...tragically...much of the story of the Old Testament...especially when we come to the prophets...is a story of God's people not being faithful to him; God's people turning away from following the Lord and sort of embracing the gods of their culture—the gods of their neighbors—the gods that seem to be more real—that seem to deliver more...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

This God was invisible; he was hard to follow, you know; he was inscrutable at times; and all of this added up to a kind of spiritual adultery...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And so that is how that image came to be used in the prophets.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Including...we could go to the prophet Ezekiel, whose book is known for a lot of bizarre imagery...but in Ezekiel 16 God paints a very interesting picture of this, where the imagery shifts a little bit. It shifts from a rescued baby to somebody who, once the baby grows up, then God also marries, so it has some mixed imagery; but God describes Israel as like a child abandoned by the side of the road, but whom God found, and God says in Ezekiel 16:9:

I bathed you with water and washed the blood from you and poured ointments on you. ¹⁰I clothed you with an embroidered dress and put sandals of fine leather on you. I dressed you in fine linens and costly garments...(and he goes on) I put jewelry on you...(and so, the Lord did all of this and then says) ¹⁴Your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty, because the splendor I had given you made your beauty perfect; ¹⁵but you trusted in your beauty and used your fame to become a prostitute. So, there it is...

DAVE BAST

Yikes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Unfortunately, a lot of the idea of Israel as God's bride or as God's spouse...a lot of the time when it is used in the Old Testament is Israel being a bad spouse, and an unfaithful spouse.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; and Ezekiel literally says in this passage that you read, Scott, that the Lord made Israel his queen, and then she turned around and became a prostitute. It is as though you are reading Cinderella, and Prince Charming takes her in and clothes her and all this wonderful stuff, and they get married, and instead of living happily ever after, you know, she turns unfaithful...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And begins to sleep around in the castle; and that is meant to shock us, and I think, that is the point in the prophets as we read this. How could God's people do this?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and again, as you said earlier, Dave, when they did this, what were they doing? How would you be unfaithful...how would you be an adulterer to God? Well, when you go after other gods. When you go after other religions; and indeed, the Baals and the Asherahs and the left-over remnants of Canaanite religion...and then later maybe some of Babylonian religion...looked more attractive. These gods seemed to offer more. It was quicker, easier with Baal than with Yahweh. So, it is when they set their heart on something other than God that that was regarded as a break in the marriage relationship; and you know, there are a number of writers who have written books today talking about now the Church. Do we do this sometimes? Well, yes; sometimes we do. Jamie Smith [James K.A. Smith] has talked about sort of almost the idols and the cult of the shopping mall, and how we place our hearts on...how success is defined by Victoria's Secret or Forever 21 or the stores that send images out about what life is supposed to be. You set your heart on those things as marks of the good life, you've moved away from God—from Jesus in the Church context.

DAVE BAST

I think of a book by Richard Foster, the spiritual writer: *Money, Sex, and Power*, and those, he says, are the big three idols of our culture. No, we don't have Baals, we don't have statues, we don't have images that we fall down before, but we certainly pursue other things than God; and when we give our hearts to those things instead of him, we are really betraying him. We are like unfaithful Israel; but, you know, judgment would come. If you know the story of the Old Testament, you know that God did punish his people. He allowed Jerusalem to be destroyed; he allowed them to be carried into exile; but there come, toward the end of the great prophets, these promises of restoration; and a passage like this one from the end of Isaiah is so powerful I think, where God says:

^{62:3}You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. ⁴You shall no more be termed Forsaken; and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight is in Her; and your land, married; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married; ⁵for as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you; and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

Those are prophecies that really, we think we believe came true in Christ when Christ came into the world and redeemed his people, and brought them back. So, we want to turn next to the New Testament and explore that further.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this second program of five in a series looking at images in the New Testament for the Church; and in this program, the Church as the bride of Christ. Now, Dave, we just saw that this has a rich Old Testament background, where the people of Israel were again and again compared to God's spouse—God's bride—God's beloved one. With Israel, unfortunately, they were not a very faithful spouse, and a lot of the passages in the Old Testament that use that imagery of Israel as God's wife are sad passages because Israel is God's adulterous wife because they

went after other gods; but that was the goal of the relationship, and God...as we just saw at the end of the last segment, Dave, from Isaiah 62...God promised that the day would come when this marriage relationship would work. God would patch things back up with his wife; and so, when we get to what we now call the new Israel, which is the Church, no surprise, the image comes back.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is true that the phrase: Bride of Christ does not appear in the New Testament. For that matter, neither does the word *trinity*; but the thing is there, and so we believe it is appropriate to use this phraseology; because the bride is described in the New Testament, and increasingly, as we get toward the end of the New Testament, into the book of Revelation, and it is pretty clear to whom the bride belongs. So, we have a passage like this from Revelation 19, where John writes:

⁶I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting, "Hallelujah, for our Lord God Almighty reigns!" ⁷Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory, for the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. ⁸Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear."

So, great climax of the New Testament is this wedding feast...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; the wedding feast of the Lamb.

DAVE BAST

Where the Lamb is the bridegroom, and the Church is the bride; and they are finally and forever united in a perfect relationship of love.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that gets...what you just said, Dave...gets at very close to the heart of another implication of this image; or rather, what undergirds this image comes up again and again and again. The bride of Christ is not mentioned a lot, as you said; in the book of Revelation it becomes important; but what is mentioned a lot, particularly in Paul, is the image of union with Christ. In fact, we have noted before here on *Groundwork*, Paul had a favorite two-word prepositional phrase: *en Christo*—in Christ; and he used it all the time. When we are baptized, we gain union with Christ...we become one with Jesus; and in fact, Paul makes this extremely explicit in Ephesians Chapter 5. Paul inserts this astonishing statement, quoting from Genesis:

³¹For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. (Okay, yes; we get Adam and Eve...we get that marriage...but then he says) ³²This is a profound mystery, but I am talking about Christ and the Church...Paul says.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am not talking about Adam and Eve; I am not talking about Steve and Julie; I am talking about Christ and the Church being one flesh.

DAVE BAST

Yes; wow; and that is a great passage. You know, Ephesians 5 is somewhat controversial because a few verses earlier Paul is talking about husbands and wives, and he is sort of giving out advice about loving and submitting and being subject, and that has sometimes been seen as teaching a kind of patriarchal husband over the wife sort of thing; but Paul really is using that illustratively for what he really wants to talk about, which is not marriage. Marriage is fine. I get that. Everything he says about marriage is true; but what he really wants to talk about is this idea of union between Christ and his Church; and it comes down to the individual level as well. The union between Christ and a believer—between Christ and a Christian—this sort of intimacy where Paul could say, as he does in another place: I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I live, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved

me and gave himself for me. That is from Galatians 2:20. So, this is a profound mystery, as he says. We sometimes, in fact, call it the mystical union between Christ and the Church, or between Christ and the Christian, because it is something that sort of blows our mind. It is beyond understanding; but this, at the deepest level, must be, says Paul, what the Christian faith is all about.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and I mentioned earlier that phrase: In Christ—*en Christo* in the Greek—probably Paul writes it about ninety-five times throughout his thirteen letters; so, this is an extremely important concept.

The great theologian Lew Smedes did a lot of work on this in one of his very, very early works, and he said: You know, when we become one with Christ, what does that mean? Well, it means all kinds of things; but one thing it means is that we are ushered into the new cosmic situation that Jesus' death and resurrection made possible. We are ushered in to the whole new era, where darkness is in retreat and where light has returned. So, if this is sort of a marriage image, you know, when you get married literally, you recognize everything in your life has changed. You are in a new situation. You are a married couple now. You have someone you can refer to as *wife*, as *husband*. It even sounds funny the first few times. Is this your wife? Oh, yes; it is...

DAVE BAST

Oh, that's right; yeah, yeah; that's right; that did happen, didn't it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is what it is in Christ, that we have been ushered into this whole new situation, where Jesus has given himself up for us, and now we have union with him; and therefore, all that Christ has to offer is with us. So, we are one flesh with Christ, which is easy to forget; and we saw this before in different contexts in *Groundwork*, in Corinthians for instance, when Paul has to tell the Corinthians to stop doing bad things...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Particularly when he has to tell the men that now that you are a Christian, you cannot keep going to prostitutes. He says: Don't you remember, you are one flesh with Jesus. You don't want to make Jesus one flesh with also a prostitute, do you? He comes along for the ride. You are one flesh with him. Do you not know, Paul says again and again. Do you not know? And indeed, we could all ask ourselves that question: Do we really realize that that intimacy...almost that sexual image of one flesh...is who we are with Jesus? You would think that would influence us on a moment by moment basis...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

More than maybe it does.

DAVE BAST

You think back to that idea of spiritual adultery...being unfaithful to your true spouse...and that is Christ for us; and in fact, Paul does make the point that Christ loved the Church, he says in Ephesians 5, and gave himself up for her. Why? To make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the Word. There is that baptism image again, Scott; and to present her to himself as a radiant Church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. So, this idea of purity, that is why Jesus died. Not just to save us from sin or not just to keep us from going to hell, but to turn us into something really, really beautiful and radiant like a bride—the most beautiful bride. That is a wonderful idea; and really, we want to pursue that just a little bit further, and ask what does that mean for me personally in terms of, really, what my life is for and what it is all about; and that is what we will talk about next.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. So, we have been talking about this fantastic image of the bride of Christ, and the intimacy that that suggests; and the fact that we belong to Christ—we are almost one flesh with him as a husband with a wife; and we talked about that in corporate terms, so the Church is meant to be radiant and pure and all the rest of it; but thinking as an individual now, what does that really mean for me; and what does it mean for what I most want—what I most desire in life? You know, Scott, we want a lot of things, don't we?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and you began the program, Dave, talking about Aladdin's lamp. If you had three wishes, what would you wish for? I mean, there is a reason why that image of Aladdin's lamp and the genie who will grant you three wishes has endured throughout history. It is because it describes what a lot of us really would love. Oh, I'd *love* to get what I most want...

DAVE BAST

It's the reason people buy lottery tickets, isn't it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes; what I wish for; and for a lot of people it would be more money. Maybe you would wish, you know, that your children would be happy, but a lot of people think about material things; but the question for us Christians becomes: If you had to list what is your ultimate desire? What should you want most? Would you get to what the Westminster Catechism says is what should be our deepest desire? To enjoy God and love him forever, right? Really? Aladdin gives you...the genie gives you three wishes...your first wish would be: I wish I could just be one with God and enjoy God forever. I don't think too many people would think that would come to their mind first, although maybe it should.

DAVE BAST

You know, Paul actually says it almost in those terms: I want to know Christ...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

He says it in Philippians 3. What do I want? I want to know Christ; and you think about that word *know*, and it's full biblical meaning...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes.

DAVE BAST

There is almost a sexual connotation to it, often, in the Old Testament. I want to be so deeply united with Christ that I know him in a way far more than even the best husband and wife knows each other. That is what he wanted; and somehow I would like to say, though, I am far from Paul, I would like that, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

I think we often get this the wrong way around. We think that the deepest thing you can enjoy in life is to really be intimate with another person—really be in love, and have that loving marriage—and that is a great thing, sure; but if you cannot have that, well maybe you can turn to God and kind of try to serve him instead; but I think what Paul suggests...what the New Testament suggests...is that it is exactly the other way around. Knowing God is the reality; our marriages...our relationships...our loves here on earth, whether for other people or things...those are only shadows of what it is like to know God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; the desire of the psalmist in Psalm 17:15: As for me, I shall behold your (God's) face in righteousness. When I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness, O God.

So, there is the psalmist saying that is what I want most; but you are right, Dave. We substitute a lot of different things for that intimacy with God, but we also fail to recognize that indeed, as C. S. Lewis often wrote about, that those things are just the preview of coming attractions. Those are the shadows. The real thing is coming. Marriage...intimacy with a husband and wife is great. It is a gift of creation. It is a lovely, lovely thing, no doubt about it; but, it is itself kind of a sneak preview. It is just sort of the cartoon sketch—the stick figures—compared to the real thing that we were made for, which is intimacy with God—with our creator, which is what God wanted with Adam and Eve in the beginning: Union with his creatures, fellowship; and in the end, that is what our deepest hankering is. Our hearts are restless until they rest in you, O God...Augustine's famous line.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you mentioned C. S. Lewis...it makes me think of the line where he says, you know, we human beings messing around with things like sex and power and money are like a child from the slums playing in the mud, who doesn't know and cannot imagine what a holiday by the seashore would be like. Our minds begin to boggle at the thought of what is in store, as the Bible says, for those who know and love God; but here is something that the great theologian Jonathan Edwards wrote in one of his sermons many years ago: The enjoyment of God is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives or children or the company of earthly friends are but shadows...I wonder if C. S. Lewis actually read Jonathan Edwards...but God is the substance. These are but scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but streams, but God is the fountain. These are but drops, but God is the ocean.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is a good set of imagery there...from Edwards.

DAVE BAST

Isn't that beautiful?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, that is quite amazing, and it is a very, very beautiful image, reminding us that we are on a journey toward something, and we are on a journey back to the God who made us in the first place; and we are on a journey, not just back to Eden, but to Eden-plus—to Eden restored—the new kingdom will be even better than that; and speaking of that, Dave, we began earlier and we talked about Revelation 19...that is, the Bible comes to its climax—this idea of the Church as the bride of Christ, and the wedding feast of the Lamb becomes ever more prominent; and certainly in Revelation 21 and 22, at the end of the Bible, verse 17: The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let the one who hears say, "Come!" And let the one who is thirsty come. Let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life... ²⁰He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

DAVE BAST

So, the Bible began in a garden, it ends in a garden; and it ends with this wonderful invitation. The Lord himself, and his Church, are inviting you and anyone who wants to come and experience his life.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thanks be to God. Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and we hope you will join us again next time when we study the biblical image of the Church as the family of God.

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