

The Bridegroom and His Bride



**BIBLE STUDIES ON WHAT IT MEANS TO BE
PART OF THE BRIDE OF CHRIST
WAITING FOR THE COMING BRIDEGROOM!**

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In the New Testament, one of the pictures or illustrations of Jesus and His Church is the Bridegroom and His Bride.

Every true Christian is part of the Bride of Christ, the Church.

One day the Bridegroom, the Lord Jesus Christ, will return to take His Bride to be with Him forever.

What is our Bridegroom like? What does it mean to be part of the Bride of Christ? What are some characteristics of the Bridegroom and His Bride? How does this parallel human marriage, between a bridegroom and his bride?

These studies look at some of the answers to these questions.

The Bridegroom is coming soon - and the Bride needs to be ready! **Am I ready?**

The Bride of Christ

INTRODUCTION

The words “The Bride of Christ” do not occur in the Bible as such. But the concept certainly does! Revelation 21:9 refers to “the Bride, the wife of the Lamb”, and the Lamb, of course, refers to Jesus Christ.

Also, in Ephesians 5:32, after writing about husbands and wives, Paul relates this relationship and unity, to the Church (the people of God) and Christ: “This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the Church”.

We will look at both the above Bible verses, in more detail, later.

There are some wonderful parallels between physical marriage here on earth and “spiritual” marriage between Christ (the Bridegroom) and Christians (the Bride), both here on earth and in Heaven.

Right back in the beginning, after God had created Adam, He said: “It is not good for man to live alone” (Gen. 2:18) and God created the first woman, Eve, to be Adam’s wife and companion. Men and women need each other – and we need God! Adam needed a “bride” – so does Christ!

In spite of all our divisions and wars, we are social people – we need each other, and we need God!

John the Baptist, speaking about the coming of Christ (the Messiah) said: “The Bride belongs to the Bridegroom” (see John 3:28-30).

- Without the Bridegroom there is no Bride!
- Without the Bride there is no Bridegroom!

Why the Bride?

The Bride is a spiritual illustration of the Church – all those who love the Lord God. Note that to love the Lord implies that we will follow Him and obey Him.

1. There is no Bridegroom without a Bride. It is interesting to note that the word “Groom” does not occur in the Bible – only “**Bridegroom**”!

God made us for fellowship, intimacy and communion with Him – a Bride to love! – an eternal relationship.

2. A Bride’s beauty and purity is a Bridegroom’s honour, pride and joy. “She is **My** Bride!” cf. A King and Queen (e.g., Queen Esther; see Esther 2:15b-18).

3. To propagate or multiply children of the Father. God said to Adam and Eve, and God says to us, “Be fruitful and multiply” – both physically and spiritually. We are to reproduce the Father in the children and children’s children.

Hence the triple tragedy of:

1. Not being part of the Bride because we have rejected the Bridegroom. (The Bride is the Body of Christ, but this Body has many parts – members – even though there is only one Bride or Body).

2. Sin ruins the image of the beautiful Bride, and dishonours the Bridegroom.

3. Failure to bear children (cf. The Biblical stigma of barrenness as mentioned in the lives of Sarah, Rachel, Hannah and Elizabeth). E.g., Think of what some barren couples do today in order to have children.

A word to those who are not married ...

– never married, widowed, separated, divorced

- In the **physical** sense: you may one day be married, but “be content in whatever state God calls you” to be – don’t be envious or jealous if you want to be married but are not – rejoice in the spiritual truths anyway! See 1 Corinthians 7:7-9, 25-40.
- In the **spiritual** sense this all applies to you, even if you never marry.

What the New Testament says

What does the New Testament teach about the marriage of the Bride and the Bridegroom?

- **The Bride: The New Jerusalem**

Revelation 19:6-9; 21:1-4, 9-27. The Bride is spoken of as the New Jerusalem, the Heavenly City, which is another picture of God’s people. A “city” is a large group of people in one place – not scattered everywhere, and not including everyone – but a significant, united group which was often, in Biblical times, protected by the wall around the city. As mentioned before, the Bride is the Body of Christ – this Body has many parts, including all those believers who lived before the time of Christ. But there is only one Bride or Body or City because we are all united in Christ, through faith in Him.

- **The Wedding Banquet**

Matthew 22:1-14. There are two major points to this story. One is that we need to accept God’s invitation to be part of the wedding banquet. The invitation goes out, but tragically many refuse to come! “Many are called, but few are chosen.” The other major point is that

the only way we can be part of the wedding banquet is to be clothed in a wedding garment. The garment of righteousness, which Christ gives us, is the only way we can be clothed in order to be part of His wedding feast. Our own “righteousness” is like filthy rags which are unfit for the Kingdom of God. So who is chosen? Those who are clothed with the righteousness we have in Christ; we are “clothed in fine linen”.

- **The Bridegroom**

Luke 12:35-40. The Bridegroom comes unexpectedly, therefore be ready! cf. The reverse usually occurs in Western culture where the groom usually waits for the bride! “His Bride has made herself ready!” (Rev. 19:7).

- **The Bridesmaids**

Matthew 25:1-13. We want to be the **Bride**, not the bridesmaids – onlookers! When the wedding is over, the bridesmaids are still not married (cf. those outside the Kingdom of God when the doors are shut).

The betrothal (engagement)

It all begins with the call of the Bridegroom and His proposal: “Follow Me!” Jesus calls us all to become followers of Him – to forsake everything which would hinder our relationship with Him and come, follow Him.

Tragically, many people are called but few choose to follow. The cares of this world, sin, other people, or other things keep many people out of the Kingdom of God. See Luke 14:15-24.

But when we hear His call and respond to Him, we are born again by His Spirit and become followers (disciples) of Jesus Christ.

Have you been born again? (See John 3:1-16). Are you a disciple (follower) of Jesus? Are you “engaged” to Him in an exclusive spiritual relationship, with Jesus Christ as your only Lord and Saviour?

This is where it all begins! If you haven’t got this far yet, then **NOW** is the time to respond to His call on your life, and say:

“Yes, Lord Jesus, I want You to be my Lord and Saviour. I want to follow You. I want to be a part of your Bride – the Bride of Christ. Please make me one of your children now and make me one of Your disciples. I want to live with You and for You all the days of my life, both in time and eternity. Thank You, Lord Jesus!”

See Revelation 22:17.

Prepare the Bride! Here comes the Bridegroom!

When I first started this study on the Bride of Christ, I was going to look at some characteristics of a bride which are also characteristics of the Bride of Christ, and *then* look at parallel characteristics of a bridegroom which are also characteristics of Christ. But as I went through this study I soon realised that it all starts with **Christ, the Bridegroom**. Hence each study will *begin* with the Bridegroom and *then* look at the Bride!

QUESTIONS

1. What are some similarities between a bride and the Church?
2. Who will be included in the Bride of Christ?
3. Why is the New Jerusalem referred to as the Bride?
4. What does the wedding garment refer to in Matthew 22:11-14?
5. How can we make sure we are ready for the coming Bridegroom?
6. How is the Bridegroom's invitation extended to people, to be part of the Bride? Why do some people not accept the invitation?

1

THE BRIDEGROOM: GIVES HIS LIFE FOR HIS BRIDE

In human terms, it is very easy for a bridegroom or a bride to be very selfish, and this is one of the major reasons why some marriages fall apart. But where a husband and wife truly love one another, and try to put the other person first in their lives, their marriage is much more likely to succeed.

One of the amazing things about our "Heavenly Bridegroom" is that He gave His life for His Bride! There could be no greater demonstration of His love for us, than that!

Right back in **Genesis 22:1-18** we read a very interesting prophetic story about Abraham and his son Isaac. God asked Abraham to take his only son – the son who he loved – and offer him up as a sacrifice. It is hard to imagine a greater test that Abraham could have faced: his only child, born when Abraham was 100 years old, now a young boy – offer him up as a sacrifice? But Abraham's faith in God was incredible. He believed that God could

even raise his son from the dead, if necessary (Heb. 11:17-19). In fact God offered up **His** only Son as a sacrifice, 2000 years later, and God **did** raise His Son from the dead!

Abraham laid the wood for the burnt offering on his son, and he carried the wood just as Jesus carried His cross.

When Isaac asked his father, "Where is the lamb for the offering?" his father answered, "God Himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering" (v. 8) – and 2000 years later God provided His Son as the Lamb of God for the burnt offering which would take away the sins of the world.

Just as Abraham was about to sacrifice his son on the altar, God stopped him and showed him a ram (a male lamb) which He told Abraham to offer in his son's place (v. 13).

Because of his faith and obedience, God blessed Abraham and his descendants.

This is a wonderful picture of what Jesus, our Bridegroom, has done for us. He was willing to lay down His life for us so that we would be blessed, even at His cost. And through faith in Him and obedience to Him, we can enter into the gift of eternal life.

Paul, in **Romans 5:6-8**, makes the interesting comment that most of us would not be prepared to lay down our lives for other people, though perhaps for a friend, or for a really good person we might be willing to die. But God shows His love for us in that, while we were still **sinner**s – enemies, alienated from God by sin – His Son died for us! Jesus sacrificed Himself (not just His possessions) for us, because He loves us so much!

The book of Hebrews deals a lot with Jesus, our great High Priest, and the sacrifices required by the Old Testament Law. In the Old Testament sacrifices were made regularly for sin, and the blood of lambs was shed to cover the people's sins. But when Christ died for our sins, He died "once and for all" (Heb. 10:10-14) – He was the final sacrifice, Whose blood not only covered our sins, but took them away completely – forever! Don't keep confessing "old" sins which you have already confessed before!

So, today, a sacrifice is no longer needed for our sins. Not even good works will atone for our sins. Jesus has done it all!

Ephesians 2:8-10 says that "By grace you have been saved, through faith, and this is not of your own doing; it is the gift of God, not the result of works, so that no-one can boast. We have been created in Christ Jesus for good works." So our salvation comes totally by God's grace to us, which we receive by faith (and even faith is a gift from God). As a **result** of our salvation, and of becoming one with our Saviour and Lord (our Heavenly Bridegroom), good works will flow from our lives.

No matter how hard we try, we can **never** earn our salvation. But the good things we do will demonstrate our salvation and the working of God's Spirit in our lives.

What God does with our sins when we repent

- Psalm 103:10-12. Removed, as far as the east is from the west.
- Isaiah 1:18. Made white like snow; like wool.
- Isaiah 38:17. Cast behind God's back.
- Isaiah 43:25. Blotted out; forgotten.
- Jeremiah 31:34. Never to be remembered again.
- Micah 7:19. Trodden under foot; buried in the depths of the sea.
- Romans 8:1-4. No more condemnation.
- 1 John 1:7, 9. Cleansed.

How does this relate to marriage?

See **Ephesians 5:21-33**. Notice the following points in this passage:

1. We are told to "be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ" (v. 21). In other words, instead of always wanting to be the boss, be in charge and always get our own way, we are to be subject to each other – in honour, preferring one another above ourselves (Rom. 12:10). This does not mean that in marriage there is no leadership, but simply that we are to be humble and unselfish in our attitudes to each other, just as Jesus was.

2. Wives are told to be subject to their husbands as they are to the Lord, for the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the Head of the Church, the Body (or Bride) of which He is the Saviour (v. 22-24). **Jesus** isn't bossy, demanding, selfish, proud, manipulative, a bully, domineering or violent with us; neither should husbands be!

3. Husbands are to love their wives just as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her (v. 25-27). Christ's life was given for others. He came to seek and to serve those who were lost. He gave everything He had to minister to the needs of others. It isn't hard to be subject to a Person like that! And His purpose in doing this was so that He could have a pure, splendid, spotless Bride, holy and without blemish! Such a wife is the glory of her Husband! She is a pleasure to Him and He is a pleasure to her!

4. Husbands are to love their wives as they love themselves (v. 28). There is no room for selfishness, laziness, greed, pride, hate, self-centeredness, etc. We all look after ourselves pretty well – and so we should look after our spouse. As someone once said, "Do yourself a favour – love your wife!" Paul put it this way: "He who loves his wife, loves himself."

Husbands look after and feed their own bodies, and care for themselves (just as Christ does the Church) and in the same way they should look after their wives (v. 28).

5. We are members of His Body – part of His Bride (v. 30-31). Just as a man leaves his father and mother, and is joined to his wife, and the two become one flesh, in the same way we are to forsake the world, the flesh and the devil, and become one with Christ, our Bridegroom.

6. This is a great mystery – the parallel between a husband and wife, and Christ and the Church – but we are the Bride of Christ and He is our Bridegroom.

7. In conclusion, every husband is to love his wife (as Christ loves the Church) and every wife should respect her husband (as we respect the Lord), (v. 33).

Philippians 2:5-11

This passage summarises the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, in His:

**Life – Humility – Death –
Resurrection – Ascension – Exaltation**

What an amazing, wonderful, gracious and loving Husband we have in Christ!

The test of true love is **sacrifice** – e.g., With a seriously ill spouse. How much are we willing to sacrifice? Time, money, commitment, effort; even at cost to us?

When King David was so grateful to God that he wanted to offer up a sacrifice, one of his people offered him everything he needed for the sacrifice, but David said, “I will not offer to God what cost me nothing” (2 Sam. 24:18-25). In a sense, if it doesn’t cost, if it doesn’t hurt, it might not be much of a sacrifice! E.g., The woman who knelt at Jesus’ feet, washed His feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair and poured out the alabaster box of costly ointment. E.g., The widow who gave all she had – two of the smallest coins.

God is a jealous God

In light of the above, it might seem strange to read that God is a jealous God (Exod. 20:3-5). Why? He is a jealous Bridegroom because He loves us so much! He wants an exclusive relationship with us! He doesn’t want our lives or relationship to be spoiled by anything else. The more you love, the more jealous you become for what you love. The world, the flesh and the devil will do all they can to take away our devotion and love for our God, but He will not share us with another “partner”! He is ours and we are His – exclusively and for ever!

QUESTIONS

1. Why is selfishness such a problem in marriage, and in the church?
2. What does it mean to “lay down your life” for other people?
3. In what ways does Genesis 22:1-18 illustrate what Christ did for the Church?
4. According to Ephesians 5:21-33, how should husbands and wives treat each other?
5. According to Ephesians 5:21-33, how should Christians treat each other?
6. How can a holy God be jealous?

2

THE BRIDE: PURE AND BEAUTIFUL

In the last study we looked at the Bridegroom from the perspective that the Bridegroom gives His life for His Bride. In this study we look at the first of the Bride's characteristics: she is pure and beautiful.

THE BRIDE: PURE

“Christ loved the Church (His Bride) and gave Himself up for her in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the Word, so as to present the Church to Himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – so that she may be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:25-27).

The Bridegroom has given His life for His bride, so that she might be holy and pure.

Back in the Garden of Eden, before the Fall, God created Adam and Eve in perfection. There was no sin, no sickness, no death. God provided all they needed. They lived in peace, prosperity and happiness; in unspoiled fellowship with God and with each other. That world must have been inconceivably beautiful – without sin or anything to spoil it. How different our world is today!

In the Bible, the word “virgin” is quite often used (e.g., 2 Cor. 11:2). But today we seldom hear this word used because so few people are still virgins when they marry. The value of purity has been lost.

The Bible also talks about “white garments” (like a bride's dress); the white representing purity (Rev. 3:4-6; 19:6-9).

There is a **beauty** in purity, like an “innocent” child (see Mark 10:13-16), but sadly that beauty and purity is soon lost in the world. Television, newspapers and other media, advertising, etc., have all contributed to a major pollution of our world by sin, immorality, violence and so on. The innocence and beauty has been lost.

No-one knows how long Adam and Eve lived in perfection in the Garden of Eden, but one day they disobeyed God and were separated from Him. Since then God has provided a way back. The sin which separates us from God can only be atoned for by blood. First, the shed blood of animals covered the people's sins, until the Lamb of God came and shed His Blood to take away our sins forever and restore us into a right relationship with the Father.

There is a way back: through the Blood shed by Jesus Christ on the cross. Revelation 7:9-17 describes a great multitude from every nation, standing before the throne of God, robed in white – those who have “washed their robes and made them white in the Blood of the Lamb” (v. 14).

Sickness, pain, suffering and death came into this world because of sin. Therefore we need to deal ruthlessly with sin and pray for forgiveness and healing.

Seven steps to restoration

- **Repentance:** turning our back on sin and everything which is displeasing to God
- **Confession:** agreeing with God that we have sinned and are sinners
- **Return** (of what was taken): doing our best to make restitution when we have sinned against other people
- **Ask forgiveness:** asking forgiveness from God and everyone we have wronged
- **Receive forgiveness:** receiving the forgiveness we have been offered – in a sense, we need to “forgive ourselves” and not, in unbelief, continue to live under the condemnation of sin which has been repented of, confessed and for which forgiveness has been asked (Rom. 8:1-4)
- **Reconciliation:** bringing back into unity, oneness and agreement
- **Restoration:** restoring broken or strained relationships

The Bible calls this process, being “justified” – just as if I’d never sinned!

Compare the first two chapters of the Bible, Genesis 1 & 2, with the last two chapters in the Bible, Revelation 21 & 22. In between was not only the Fall but also the way of redemption. In the Garden of Eden before the Fall, there was Heavenly bliss and wonderful union with God. At the end of time, before the throne of God, there will also be Heavenly bliss and wonderful union with God. The Blood of Jesus Christ has restored us back to where we should always have been!

“Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool” (Isaiah 1:18). See also Zechariah 3:1-5 and Mark 9:2-3 (His garments were “whiter than white”!)

On a very practical note:

We need to do all we can, with God’s help, to forsake evil and sin, and to keep ourselves and our relationships clean and pure.

“How can a young person cleanse their way ...?” See Psalm 119:9-11.

Also, with regard to marriage relationships, we are exhorted to maintain purity, both before **and** after marriage! (Heb. 13:4).

Where we have failed, Jesus reminds us that “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me because He has anointed Me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives and sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour” (Luke 4:18-19).

Cleansing and Forgiveness

Two sacraments in the Church are baptism and communion.

Water baptism represents the washing away of our sins when we repent and ask God’s forgiveness. We are immersed into the water (dying to the old way of life); we are “buried with Christ” under the water; and we are raised out of the water into newness of life in Christ. See Matthew 3:1-17; 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-20; Acts 2:37-42; 8:26-40; 16:25-34; Romans 6:1-11. In 1 Corinthians 10:1-4 Paul likens baptism to the sin and slavery the children of Israel suffered in Egypt (the land of bondage); their deliverance from Egypt; their “baptism” in the Red Sea and their entry into the Promised Land.

We are baptized into Christ and become part of the Bride of Christ, His Body, the Church. The true Church of Jesus Christ is not a physical building but all those who have been “called out” (Gk: *ekklesia*) and separated from the world; they are made holy by the Blood of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

There is only one water baptism for repentance and salvation. This should occur at the **beginning** of our Christian lives. So what happens if we sin after we have been baptized? How do we **continue** to receive forgiveness and cleansing?

Communion (the Lord’s Supper or Eucharist) is something which we don’t do just once (like water baptism). “As often as you eat this bread ... as often as you drink this cup”. Each time we take communion we need to make sure our lives are in a right relationship with Christ and with one another. This is an on-going process. See 1 Corinthians 11:23-32.

So: We were not pure, but Christ has cleansed us by His Blood so that we may be presented to Him “without spot or wrinkle or any such thing”. Hallelujah! See 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.

THE BRIDE: BEAUTIFUL

The Bride is not only to be pure but also to be beautiful! In fact, a **very** bride is beautiful! Have you ever heard of a bride who wasn’t “lovely”? You are the “Loveliest or fairest of them all” (Song of Solomon 1:8; 5:9; 6:1). See Isaiah 61:10.

The Bride is to be “without spot or wrinkle or any such thing” (Eph. 5:25-27). We try to **hide** or cover up our spots and wrinkles (e.g., with moisturizing cream, ointment, powder, etc). He **removes** them! – by His forgiveness and cleansing. Think of the new treatments people use today: surgery, implants, injecting fillers under the skin to remove baggy skin and

wrinkles! We try to hide our imperfections, like Adam and Eve trying to hide the shame of their nakedness from God (Gen. 3:7, 10-11, 21) but God wants to clothe us with the robes of righteousness – pure, white linen. (By the way, our inner beauty is far more important than our outward appearance!)

God does not want us to be “marred in the Potter’s hands” (Jer. 18:1-11). So He reforms or re-works the clay (this is like being born again). He is not satisfied with imperfections!

The Bible talks about “the beauty of holiness” (Ps. 29:2; 96:9). Think of the Temple in all its glory and beauty. Think too of our bodies, which are to be pure, holy, beautiful temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19-20).

Genesis chapters 1 and 2 speak of the New Creation. Revelation chapters 21 and 22 speak of the New Jerusalem. The whole Bible lies in between these two events because of man’s sin! But in the midst, between the Old and New Testaments, lies the re-creation: “If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come!” (2 Cor. 5:17).

In Genesis 1 we have the First Adam + first bride. In Revelation 22 we have the Last Adam + **the** Bride!

The beauty of the Bride – her purity and faithfulness – brings honour and glory to the Bridegroom.

QUESTIONS

1. How can the Bride of Christ be pure when she is composed of sinful people?
2. What is meant by the statement: “There is a beauty in purity”?
3. Sin separates – it separates us from other people and from God. What are seven steps to the restoration of fellowship between us and those we have sinned against (including God)?
4. Jesus proclaims “release” and “freedom” (Luke 4:18). What has He released us from and how does He set us free?
5. In what way is baptism the beginning, and communion the continuation, of God’s process of forgiveness and cleansing in our lives (the process of sanctification)?
6. How does the beauty and purity of the Bride bring honour and glory to the Bridegroom?

3

THE BRIDEGROOM: PROTECTS

One of the wonderful things we can do, as Christians, is have absolute confidence and faith in God's protection over our lives. This theme is often brought out in the Psalms, many of which were written by King David who fought many battles and faced many very difficult circumstances. But through them all God was faithful.

See, for example, Psalms 23, 27 and 91.

Strength is one of God's characteristics. We sometimes use the word "omnipotent" which means that God has all power – nothing is too hard for Him; there is nothing He cannot do; nothing is outside His control.

Just as the bridegroom protects his bride, so the Lord is our shield and protector (see John 17:11; 1 Peter 1:5-7).

If we believe this – and the Bible constantly affirms that it is true – then there is no room for fear. "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (2 Tim. 1:7).

Some people are bound by a spirit of fear. They need to be set free. They need to read God's Word and especially confess the truths of it concerning God's protection and deliverance of those people who belong to Him.

The Lord is our Guardian

In Hebrews 13:5-6 God says, "I will never fail you nor forsake you".

Psalms 37:5 says, "Commit your way to the Lord, trust in Him and He will bring it to pass."

Therefore we can trust Him, even when we do not understand; even in tough and difficult times; even when we are surrounded by our enemies; even when we go through the valley of the shadow of death (Ps. 23:4-5). Our Bridegroom is still there to protect us!

The example of Job

Job was a Godly man – who also faced some very difficult trials – but God protected him and stopped Satan from taking his life, even though he suffered the loss of his possessions, his health and his family. Through difficult circumstances Job continued to trust in God's faithfulness and protection, and God brought him through!

In times like these we can always say, “Lord, I do not understand, but I trust you”. Effectively this was what Job said when he was tested. Job was the most Godly man on earth but God allowed him to lose his possessions, his health and even his children, “but in all this Job did not sin” – in spite of his wife suggesting that it would be better for him to “curse God and die”! (Job 2:9-10).

While it took a long time of wrestling with the situation and being subjected to all sorts of suggestions from his “comforters”, eventually Job came through and God blessed him abundantly, even more than at the beginning! (Job 42:10-17).

What sort of protection can we pray for?

- Physically – protection over our health and life; against attack or accident, sickness or disease
- Mentally – that God will “keep our hearts and **minds** in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:7)
- Spiritually – that God will keep us on the right track; lead us in truth; keep us from deception and spiritual attack by demonic powers
- Socially – as part of the whole Body/Bride, with our brothers and sisters in Christ; as part of the family of God

In fact, God is concerned about every part of our lives. If it concerns us, we can always bring it to the Lord in prayer.

*“What a Friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and grief to bear;
What a privilege to carry, everything to God in prayer!”*

How does God protect us?

“Deliver us from evil (the evil one)” – Matthew 6:13. Just as there is God’s angelic host, so too there are evil spiritual powers at work in the world (often, though not always) working through people. We need God’s deliverance from all evil powers, whether they are within us or outside of us. God is our Deliverer!

There are three major ways that our spiritual enemy may come against us:

- **As a roaring lion**, where his temptations and attacks are obvious to everyone (1 Pet. 5:8-9)
- **As a wolf in sheep’s clothing** – disguised, but if you look closely you will find that underneath the outer appearance, there is a wolf, not a sheep; that is, some testing is required (Matt. 7:15-20)
- **As an angel of light** (2 Cor. 11:14). In this case the gift of discernment of spirits is required to know that the so-called angel of light is, in fact, a fallen angel of darkness! Discernment is needed!

Satan is a liar and the father of lies; deception is his trademark (John 8:44; Matt. 24:24). We need to test all things by the Word of God and the united witness of the Holy Spirit.

So how does God protect us?

1. **The Good Shepherd watches over His sheep** and protects them – John 10:1-18. Note the intimate relationship between the Shepherd and His sheep (cf. the hired hand is a “shepherd” who does not really care for his sheep; he is more interested in himself!)
2. **God provides us with the armour of God** – Ephesians 6:10-18a. We need to recognise that we are in a spiritual battle, and be prepared for it! The easiest way to win a battle is to convince the opposition that there is no battle! We need to be prepared!
3. **“The battle is not yours, but God’s”** (2 Chr. 20:15-17). We need to recognise that primarily, the battle is God’s, not ours.
4. **He gives His angels charge over us.** One of God’s Names is: “The Lord of Hosts”. He has a whole army of angels at His disposal, to protect us and keep us! “Angels are ministering spirits” (Heb. 1:14). See also Psalm 91:11-12. But look to God, not to angels! The Bridegroom, not His servants, is our ultimate protector! God is in supreme control!

Names of God

In the Bible, God is known by a lot of different names or titles which describe His nature and character. Some of these are that He is our Protector and Shield, our Victor and the Lord of Hosts.

Elohim	Gen 1:1	My Creator (El = Mighty One)
Jehovah	Gen 2:7; Ex 3:14	I AM (eternal)
El Elyon	Gen 14:18-20	God Most High
Magen	Gen 15:1	My Shield
Adonai	Gen 15:2	My Lord / Master (Ruler and King)
El Shaddai	Gen 17:1	Almighty God
Jireh	Gen 22:14	My Provider
Rophe	Ex 15:26	My Healer
Nissi	Ex 17:15	My Victor (Banner)
Mikkadesh	Lev 20:7-8	My Sanctifier
Tsaba	Jos 5:13-15	Lord of Hosts
Shalom	Jud 6:23-24	My Peace
Rohi	Ps 23:1	My Shepherd (He feeds and protects)
Tsidkenu	Jer 23:5-6	My Righteousness
Shammah	Ezek 48:35	He is there (present; always!)

Notice how Jesus, our Bridegroom, uses the divine Name: “I AM” ... the Good Shepherd, the Bread of Life, the Way, the Truth, the Life, the Light of the World, etc.

See also His use of this Name in John 8:24, 28, 58; 18:4-8. Five times in these verses Jesus said, "I AM" (He did **not** say "I am he", as some translations have it!) He used the eternal Name of God and applied it to Himself – this is why some of the Jews wanted to stone Him to death for what they believed was blasphemy – making Himself equal with God.

The Bridegroom is our Protector, our Shield, our Deliverer and our Victor. Under His covering and protection we are safe – always, and wherever we are!

QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the ways in which God has protected you in the past, from physical or spiritual harm?
2. What lessons can we learn from the life of Job?
3. Has God removed His protection when we are sick, afflicted or attacked?
4. Has God abandoned those Christians who suffer and die for their faith in Christ?
5. Is sin always the reason why we may seem to come out from under God's protection?
6. If God is our Father, our Creator and the almighty, eternal, ever-present God, why are we sometimes afraid?

4

THE BRIDE: SECURE

In the last study we looked at the Bridegroom and His Protection of the Bride. In the next study we will look at the Bridegroom and His Provision for His Bride.

The Bridegroom's protection and provision for His Bride means that the Bride is secure in His love, protection and provision; there is no need for fear or insecurity. To have such peace of mind is a wonderful thing! In today's world there is huge insecurity because people have been abused, cheated and deceived; there is great fear of the future and what it might hold. But for the Christian who is part of the Bride of Christ, the Bible promises us God's protection and provision.

The Bridegroom is faithful to His Bride. He will never fail or forsake her (Hebrews 13:5-6). He will always watch over her, protect her and provide for her. We can rest in His love and faithfulness to us!

Secure

One of the reasons that the Book of Psalms is such a help and blessing to people is that it affirms and reaffirms God's faithfulness to us, His people. "I will not be moved" is one of its repeated phrases. "I keep the Lord always before me; because He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure" (Ps. 16:8-9). See also Psalms 55:22; 62:2; 121:3 and Hebrews 12:27-29.

One of the illustrations of the security we can have in our Heavenly Bridegroom is that He is referred to as our "Rock" – the One upon Whom we can stand secure. There are many "shifting sands" of uncertainty in our world today – wealth, employment, possessions, health, insurances, property, etc., but none of these is ultimately secure. They are like building our lives on sand. Jesus is our Rock, our Foundation, our Security – the one on Whom we can stand firm (Matt. 7:24-27). See also 1 Samuel 2:2; 2 Samuel 22:2-4; Psalm 18:2; 27:5; 1 Corinthians 10:4.

Another illustration of the confidence we can have in His protection is the expression "under His wings" – like a hen hides her chicks under her wings when danger approaches. See Psalm 17:8; 36:7; 91:4; Matthew 23:37.

As we can see, the Psalms are full of encouraging words concerning God's protection and our security in Him. Psalms 23 and 91, especially, refer to this.

Finally, the words "Fear not" occur at least 80 times in the Bible – encouraging us to fear not! Eleven of those times it says "fear not, neither be dismayed" (e.g., 1 Chr. 28:20; 2 Chr. 20:17; Is. 41:10).

When we are secure in our relationship with the Bridegroom, three other things happen; we have Rest, Peace and Faith.

Rest

Our world is so troubled and restless because the vast majority of people have not yet come to find their rest in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Him.

There is a huge sense of "relief" when we really come to know that our Bridegroom loves, cares, protects and provides for all our needs. We don't need to struggle through life (that's not to say it is always easy!) but we do need to lean on Him and trust in His promises and faithfulness to us.

Hebrews chapters 3 and 4 talk of the "rest of faith" which comes when we walk in faith and put our trust in Him. The word "sabbath" means rest. The Sabbath day is the day of rest – one day each week; but our "Sabbath rest", as Christians refers to the rest of soul and spirit which comes through obedience to Christ and faith in Him.

Unrest, uneasiness, restlessness is all around us. We live in an uneasy world, full of uncertainties, but (praise God!) we don't have to be troubled and worried about these things; "Take it to the Lord in prayer!"

Jesus said "Come to me all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

Jesus faced some horrific situations – He was almost stoned and pushed over a cliff; He was falsely accused, forsaken by His loved ones, whipped and crucified. How could He say these words? Because He had absolute faith and trust in His Heavenly Father! His Spirit was at rest though His body was so abused.

Peace

When we learn to rest in Him, a tremendous sense of His peace fills our hearts and minds. Our bodies may be busy; they may not be in the best of health; problems may surround us; people may hurt us – but inside we can have God's peace. Of course, this is not easy when, in the natural, we are deeply disturbed by circumstances around us, but still Jesus says: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in Me. ... Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid" (John 14:1, 27).

Again, the world is at war – troubles within nations and between nations; turmoil surrounds us. Everything is there to try to take away our peace. But our Bridegroom assures us of His peace when we trust in Him and surrender fully to His love and power.

Faith

Our security, rest and peace come when we have faith in God and put our complete trust in Him. Fear of the past, present or future is not of God. If we walk with Him, talk with Him, trust Him and put our faith in Him, then He *will* see us through! This does not mean that testing will not come; it means that whatever we go through, He goes through it with us. Our Bridegroom promises "I will never fail you nor forsake you". He won't desert us in times of trouble. He will not fail us. He will see us through. Sometimes it is only as we get older and look back on our lives that we see the hand of God in and through everything that has happened to us. "Once I was young; now I am old but I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread" (Ps. 37:25).

"Fear not, for I am with you. Do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you; I will help you; I will uphold you with My victorious right hand [the hand of God's strength; the hand of victory]" (Isaiah 41:10)

"Oh what peace we often forfeit! Oh what needless pain we bear!
All because we do not carry, everything to God in prayer!"

Our Bridegroom is our Protector and our Provider. We, the Bride, are secure in the Bridegroom!

QUESTIONS

1. What is it that can change us: from insecurity to security; from unrest to rest; from being troubled to being at peace; from fear to faith?
2. Why is faith so essential to successful Christian living? (Do I really believe that God is faithful to His promises – and live accordingly?)
3. If the “battle is not ours”, whose is it? (2 Chronicles 20:15-17)
4. Is it really possible for a Christian to truly feel secure in God; to be at rest in their heart and mind; and to know God’s peace in spite of difficulties they face?
5. If the Lord is our Protector, why does He sometimes allow troubles to afflict us?
6. What does it mean to be “under His wings”?

5

THE BRIDEGROOM: PROVIDES

One of the names of God is Jehovah Jireh (see Genesis 22:1-19, especially v. 14). This name means “The Lord provides” and as our Heavenly Bridegroom, He is the One Who, above all else, supplies our needs.

In Philippians 4:19 Paul reminds us that “My God shall supply all your needs according to the riches we have in glory, in Christ Jesus”. Through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, all our needs are met.

Notice that this verse says God will supply all our “needs”, not “wants”! There can be a big difference! In today’s materialistic society some people seem to think that they “need” everything. Hence we have an almost incessant shopping culture; people are always buying things (whether they really need them or not). People have run up billions of dollars of credit card debt, and pay hundreds of millions of dollars in interest every year. Shops offer up to two years free credit in order to attract more customers. Debt soars. You can even borrow money against your house in order to spend more on cars, holidays and other luxuries.

Possessions (“things”) can possess us! In fact, they can become gods in our lives. Our houses, cars, jobs, money, luxuries, etc., can turn our hearts away from God and also away from helping those with **real** needs. Hence Jesus warns us, “You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matt. 6:24).

God will supply all we **need!** But we must trust Him!

The example of Jesus

- Jesus was born in a stable and laid in a manger (Luke 2:7)
- Jesus had “nowhere to lay His head” (Luke 9:58)
- Jesus borrowed a coin to use as an illustration (Mark 12:15)
- Jesus taught His disciples to “Take nothing for your journey ...” (Luke 9:1-6)
- Jesus was buried in a borrowed tomb – not that He needed it for very long! (John 19:38-42)

Yet God provided **all** He ever needed!

The Bridegroom provides

Spiritually, our Bridegroom provides what is sometimes referred to as the “Four Square Gospel” (Luke 4:18-19):

1. **Salvation:** Jesus has given us the gift of life, both now and eternal life hereafter. “I go to prepare a place for you”, Jesus said (John 14:1-7)
2. **Deliverance:** Jesus has come to set us free from every bondage and every evil spirit. See Mark 16:17.
3. **The fulness of the Holy Spirit:** Jesus came to give us life and life more abundantly. See John 10:10; Ephesians 5:18-20. He gives us a Spirit-filled life.
4. **Healing:** See Mark 16:18; James 5:14-16.

He provides for us in every way, in every area of our lives: physically, mentally, spiritually and socially.

How God provides

God can provide supernaturally, just as the ravens fed Elijah in the wilderness (1 Kings 17:1-6). But there are other instances in the Bible of God’s miraculous provision: e.g., water from a rock (Ex. 17:6); manna and quail in the desert (Ex. 16:13-16); flour and oil for a widow (1 Kings 17:13-16); turning water into wine (John 2:1-11); feeding the 5000 and the 4000 with a few loaves and fish (Matt. 16:8-10).

But while God can, and may, provide supernaturally when there is a need, God usually provides through other people. Jesus said, “Freely you have received – freely give!” (Matt. 10:8).

It is interesting to note that before Jesus miraculously multiplied the bread and the fish, He said to His disciples “**You** give them something to eat”. They collected up what they could, and Jesus did a miracle with it (Matt. 14:15-21).

God gave Agabus a prophecy which enabled people to have their need for food met, but He provided for them through the Christians doing something about the prophetic word! God did not just supernaturally create food, in this case (Acts 11:27-30). See also Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-37; 6:1-4.

The Gifts and Fruit of the Spirit

Two of the things the Lord provides for us, as the Bride of Christ, are the gifts and the fruit of the Spirit. Lists of these are given in 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 and Galatians 5:22-25. These are like the Bridegroom’s gifts to His Bride, so that she might not lack in any way, but might glorify Him by her life and ministry.

It is interesting to note that there are **nine gifts** of the Spirit and **nine fruit** of the Spirit listed in these verses. Praise God for His gifts, but we must also make sure we bring forth the fruit! Tragically, some Christians are very keen on the gifts of the Spirit but their lives are not always manifesting the fruit of the Spirit as they should. **Both** are important!

For example, a husband may give many wonderful gifts to his wife (or vice versa) but these are given in vain if the fruit of her life is not good! Christ has given us many wonderful gifts; let us use them for His glory and live a life which is pleasing to Him, full of good fruit!

Gifts are for giving away! We should not hold on to these things and only use them for ourselves – God has given them to us so that we can share and give to others!

QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the ways God has provided for you when you have been in real need?
2. Do Christians today share with one another like the early Christians did? If not, why not?
3. Should we be more generous, caring and sharing, to meet the needs of others?
4. Why is a balance between the gifts and the fruit of the Holy Spirit so important?
5. What does God expect us to do with what He provides?
6. What would you say to a Christian who feels that God is not providing for their needs?

6

THE BRIDE: SERVES

Just as the Bridegroom provides, so the Bride serves. One is not more important than the other; both are necessary. Proverbs 31:10-31 is an “Ode to a Capable Wife” – one who has a servant heart – with both the ability and desire to serve.

Service in the Body of Christ is not, of course, limited to women! In the New Testament the word “deacon” is used, both of men and women, as people who serve or minister in the Church. This ministry or service in the Church may be in the physical, social or the spiritual realm.

Material needs

Acts 6:1-6 describes the setting aside of seven “deacons” to look after the material needs of widows in the Church. Often in the Church, the term “deacon” is used to refer to people who lead and serve in material ways, meeting the physical, social, financial and other material needs of people.

Spiritual needs

1 Corinthians 3:5-9 uses the same word (*diakonos*, from which we get the word deacon) as is used in Acts 6, but in Corinthians it is talking about the apostles Paul and Apollos who served in the ministry of the Gospel.

So a deacon is anyone who serves in the Church, either ministering to people’s spiritual, social or material needs. The word deacon, in fact, simply means to serve or minister to people.

In this sense, every Christian should be a servant or minister or deacon. Some people will be set apart for special tasks within the Church, but we can all serve in different ways, if not within the Church, then in the community as we serve and minister to anyone in need.

True servanthood

True servants are unselfish and not self-centred. Many people today seem to be very self-centred – only interested in the things that benefit and bless them, rather than giving generously and sacrificially to others in need.

Does everything revolve around **us** or does everything we do revolve around the **Son**?

Does the earth revolve around the sun, or does the sun revolve around the earth? (It all depends on where the centre is!)

Is the Bridegroom the centre of our attention and service, or are we? Is the heart and mind of the Bride steadfastly set on the Bridegroom, or only on herself?

A servant heart is a giving heart – someone who wants to help and encourage other people, even if it involves personal cost. It is the opposite of being selfish or self-centred. Which are we?

Good works

Earlier we mentioned that no matter how many good deeds we do, or how good they are, we can never earn our salvation because none of us is perfect. Nevertheless, as a result of our salvation, and God's Spirit dwelling in our lives, we should bring forth good works or deeds (see Ephesians 2:8-10).

For example, Dorcas was a woman mentioned in the Bible who was well known because "she was devoted to good works and acts of charity (love)." Because of her charitable acts, Peter came soon after she died and raised her from the dead; "and many believed in the Lord" (Acts 9:36-42). Dorcas may not have been much of an evangelist, in the sense we often use the term today, but many people came to the Lord as a result of her service and the miracle God did.

Faith *and* works

James 2:14-26 reminds us how essential both faith **and** works are. Similarly, prayer **and** action! A balance between the two is so essential. We don't want to be "so Heavenly minded that we are no earthly use" but neither do we want to be so busy serving people that we forget our relationship with God. Just as a wife may serve her children, but still needs to be lovingly devoted to her husband, so also we need to minister to people in need, but still be lovingly devoted to our Heavenly Bridegroom.

It is not a matter of one **or** the other (faith or works; prayer or action; children or husband); it is a matter of **both**, in balance! (And that balance is not always easy to maintain!)

For example, Agabus was a prophet who prophesied about a coming famine. But he didn't just bring a "mighty anointed" prophecy – the Church rose up and did something about it! (See Acts 11:27-30).

Service comes out of love

Service comes out of love, not compulsion or fear; it comes out of freedom, not slavery. We, the Bride of Christ, serve Him because we love Him, not because we are compelled to, or

afraid of what might happen if we don't. We are free – free to serve Him Whom we love – and Who first loved us and gave Himself for us!

Fruitfulness results from love

The normal expectation is that children will come out of a marriage union; children who will be a blessing to their parents. “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28; 9:1, 7). As the Bride of Christ we are to be fruitful, in union with Christ.

We are all family – we all belong to the family of God. As part of the Bride (the Church) we are to prepare, teach, discipline, train and disciple the next generation. “The old passes away; everything becomes new” – from generation to generation.

Like the “Changing of the Guard” at Buckingham Palace, generations come and go. From the Bride and Bridegroom come forth children, grandchildren, ... and so on. We need to prepare the next generation, and this might involve breaking the chains (ties) of the past. It is not easy for parents to “let go” and let their children continue to grow independently, but at some stage the “apron strings” need to be cut and the children set free to do as God leads them – no longer under the constraint of their parents but free in the Spirit to move as God leads them.

This is so important in the leadership of the Church. Too often, leadership stifles the next generation, rather than teaches, trains, encourages and then releases them into leadership. We **must** release the next generation to continue the work we have been doing, or else, when we pass on, the work and ministry of the Church will suffer great loss. Leaders – release the people to fulfill their ministries!

Ephesians 5:11 talks about apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers; but what is their purpose? Not to do all the ministry themselves but “**to equip the saints for the work of the ministry**; for building up the Body of Christ until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God; to maturity; to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (v. 12-13). So these “five-fold ministries”, as they are sometimes called, are not an end in themselves – they are called to serve the Body of Christ, to build it up and to release the saints into their callings and ministries in God!

QUESTIONS

1. What does the word “deacon” mean and how does it apply to all of us, as part of the Bride of Christ?
2. What can be done about so many people, even in the Church, whose lives seem to be so self-centred and who always seem to avoid personal sacrifice and service to others?
3. Why are faith and works **both** essential to serving God?
4. Why should Christian service flow out of love and not out of duty?

5. What does “fruitfulness results from love” mean?
6. Why is it so important that church leaders don’t try to do everything themselves but “pass on the mantle” to others, especially younger people?

7

THE BRIDEGROOM: LEADS

Jesus’ call to His disciples was “Follow Me ...” He will lead, but we must follow and obey. Notice how a rich young man (Matt. 19:16-22) and five others all refused Jesus’ invitation to follow Him for various reasons. They had bought some cattle; bought some land; got married; wanted to farewell family and friends; or wanted to bury his father first (Luke 9:57-62; 14:15-24). Excuses! There are so many reasons why people do not follow Jesus!

But for those who will follow Him, God guides, directs, provides leadership and direction.

John 10:1-5, 27 Jesus says His sheep “hear His voice” and follow Him.

How does God speak to us and lead us?

How does God speak to us and how do we speak to God? Prayer is conversing with God; that is, prayer is both talking to God **and** listening to God. Talking to God is easy; but how does God speak to us?

Jesus – the Living Word made flesh (Heb. 1:1-2; Acts 9:5-6)

Supremely, God has spoken to us through His Son, Jesus Christ, Who is the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6).

Word of God – the written Word (Ps. 119:105; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; Matt. 4:1-11; Acts 2:16-36)

God has also spoken to mankind through His eternal Word – the Holy Bible, which we sometimes call the “Word of God” because it is a trustworthy record of what God has said through the ages, to people in every age. This is God’s permanent, objective Word.

Holy Spirit-inspired Word to our spirits (John 16:12-15; Acts 8:29)

If we have been born of God’s Spirit we can expect God to speak to us, by His Spirit. This is, of course, somewhat subjective and may need to be checked; unlike Jesus, the living Word, and the Bible, the written Word, which are God’s Truth expressed in a living and a written way.

Prophets (Acts 11:27-30)

Sometimes God speaks through prophets and the prophetic word.

Audible voice (1 Sam 3:1-14; Acts 9:3-7)

Sometimes God speaks in an audible voice, or at least in words which are so clear they seem audible, and we just know God has spoken.

Dreams (Joseph Gen 37:5-11; butler and baker Gen 40; Pharaoh Gen 41; Daniel with Nebuchadnezzar). Acts 2:17.

God can also speak to us through dreams, although not every dream is from God, of course!

Visions (Joel 2:28; Acts 10:3-17)

God may also speak to us through visions – pictures or illustrations of what God is saying.

Angels (Acts 12:6-11)

God may speak through angels (God's messengers) but we do need to discern that they are from God, because the "fallen angels" are evil, deceiving spirits, so we need to test these by the Bible and by the witness of our spirit.

God-given desires (Ps. 37:1-9)

If we genuinely want to do God's will and our motives are right, God may put in our heart Godly desires for what He wants us to do, and as we pray for these things they will come to pass. These are not selfish desires, or things to make us proud, or lazy, etc., but are God-given desires!

Circumstances (Acts 9:23-25; 16:6-10)

Again, if we are committed to God and sincerely want to do His will, He can order and over-rule in our circumstances and bring to pass His will in our lives even though outward circumstances may seem to be against it.

Other Christians (Acts 16:15; 19:30-31)

One of the reasons Christian fellowship is so important is that God often speaks to us, and gives wisdom and guidance, through other people. Because we are all part of the one Bride of Christ, we need each other. God has not given everything to one person! Even to keep us humble He may not reveal everything to us alone, but wants us to work with, pray with and seek the guidance and counsel of others – especially mature, wise Christians, and those with gifts of wisdom or discernment.

Sanctified common sense (Acts 21:10-14 cf. 20:22-25)

God has given us all brains, and He expects us to use them. "Sanctified common sense" is common sense which is committed to, and led by God's Spirit. This means that **sometimes** God may lead us to do something which ordinary common sense might say is foolish. But if we are sure that it is of God, it will prosper. This does **not** mean that we can do stupid things and then blame them on God! Normally, God will not expect us to violate "common sense" but there may be times when He does! Faith is being obedient when God says to do something, even though non-Christians may see it as foolish.

Through the gifts of the Spirit, especially knowledge, wisdom, prophecy, discernment, tongues and interpretation (1 Cor. 12:4-11)

God has set in the Church a number of gifts of His Spirit and these should be used for the guidance of the Church. Note, however, that none of these gifts are infallible and we need to discern what is of God and what is not (1 Thess. 5:16-22).

Other miraculous signs (Matt. 2:1-12)

God may also guide us by other miraculous signs. God's ways of guiding us are numerous!

We speak to God in prayer or meditation, but God knows our needs even before we ask! (Matt. 6:8), The key to following Jesus "successfully" is to always be willing to be obedient to what He says. When we rebel and disobey, we are headed for trouble!

How to discern God's voice

One of the reasons God has given us the Bible is so that we can know what is God's Word and God's will for us. It is objective, not subjective (as long as we interpret it correctly). We need to test all things by the Word of God, the witness of the Spirit and confirmation by spiritual, wise, praying Christian friends.

Discernment is necessary because our human thoughts and desires often intervene.

How do we discern God's voice?

- Carefully – don't rush into important decisions
- Prayerfully – wait on God in prayer
- "Die" to "the world, the flesh and the devil" – try to discern God's ways, not ordinary human ways (Is. 55:6-9)
- Consult other mature, wise Christians
- Confirmation may also be part of God's guidance; the direction may be confirmed from a number of sources

Note: God can also "close doors" to prevent us from doing what is not His will for us.

Leadership in the Church

One of the reasons God has given leadership in the Church is to help guide those who are younger Christians (and even older Christians at times!) Elders in the Church are those Christians who are older, more experienced, wiser and more familiar with God's ways. They are there, at the human level, to help discern the will of God.

Christ is the Head of the Church (Col. 1:18), but God often speaks to us, guides and directs us through the leadership of the Church. Five of the gifts God has given to the Church are listed in Ephesians 4:11-13. These are:

Apostles: People who are sent forth from the local church to evangelize, teach and start new churches in areas where there are none. They are what we often call “missionaries” today (*Missionary* comes from the Latin, while *Apostle* comes from the Greek, but they both mean a person who is sent forth on a mission). Examples: Peter and Paul.

Prophets: People who have a prophetic ministry to the Church, not just a person who might bring a word of encouragement, exhortation or comfort to the local church from time to time, in the sense that 1 Corinthians 14:1-4 uses it. Example: Agabus.

Evangelists: People whose gifting, calling and passion is to share the Gospel with people and lead them to Christ. Every Christian is, of course, called to share their faith with non-Christians, but this might not be their primary calling. Example: Philip.

Pastors: The pastoral ministry is to care for the “sheep”. The pastor should know each of the people he cares for; he should love them, care for them, counsel and encourage them, etc. (Actually, many “pastors” are really teachers, exhorters, administrators or church-builders and are not really fulfilling a pastoral role at all!) Example: Timothy.

Teachers: Teachers teach the Word of God and the people of God. It is their task to impart wisdom, knowledge and a discernment of the ways of God, and indeed an intimate knowledge and experience of God Himself. Example: James.

Elders, bishops (overseers), pastors (shepherds)

Apart from the above five gifts to the Church, the New Testament also speaks of elders, bishops (or overseers) and pastors (or shepherds).

An elder is an older, more experienced and spiritually mature Christian.

A bishop is an overseer (a spiritual leader in the Church).

A pastor is a shepherd, a person who looks after the people.

These terms tend to be used synonymously in the New Testament. See:

- Acts 20:17-28 (elders, overseers, pastors or shepherds)
- 1 Timothy 3:1-7 (bishops or overseers)
- Titus 1:5-9 (elders, bishops or overseers)
- 1 Peter 5:1-6 (elders, overseers, shepherds)

So the terms elder, bishop, overseer, shepherd and pastor are essentially synonymous. They are not “ranks” within the leadership of the church!

God *never* set a hierarchy in the Church – man did! The Bible speaks of deacons but not archdeacons; bishops but not archbishops; pastors but not senior pastors. Jesus said to call no-one “Father” because, spiritually, our only Father is God Himself (Matt. 23:2-12).

We need to beware of pride and any use of titles which would encourage pride. In fact it is very interesting (and humbling) to note that no-one in the New Testament Church was given the **title** Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Pastor or Teacher! Paul described himself as an apostle because that was his ministry, but he is **never** referred to as the Apostle Paul! These terms are descriptions of a person's ministry, not titles which make them more important than other people.

Descriptive titles can be used when it is necessary to describe what we do, but should not encourage us to think more highly of ourselves than we ought! (Rom. 12:3-8).

Note: There are many different churches and church structures, but God seems to be able to handle them all! What matters **most** is that we find what best serves Him and His purposes in our community, extends His Kingdom and brings glory to Him.

QUESTIONS

1. What does Psalm 23 teach us about the ways God leads us?
2. What does it mean to "die to the world, the flesh and the devil"? How do we do this? Why is it important when we are seeking to hear God's voice?
3. What are the three main ways in which God guides you?
4. How can we test whether or not dreams, visions and prophecies people give us, are really from God?
5. How does God guide through the leadership in the church?
6. What should we do if we seriously disagree with guidance being brought through our church leaders?

8

THE BRIDE: FAITHFUL

In the last study we looked at the Bridegroom as the one who leads. In turn, the Bride is not only faithful in being led by Him, and by following Him, but she is faithful to Him as a Person.

Faithfulness

Faithfulness is extremely important in any good relationship, especially between a husband and wife; parents and children; and between friends. People need to be able to trust us and we need to be able to trust them, in whatever they say or do.

Unfaithfulness destroys this trust, weakens the relationship and may even eventually lead to destroying the relationship.

This is why marriage vows often include the words: "... forsaking all others, keep yourself only for him/her ..." The Bride is to be faithful and loyal to the Bridegroom – always! (Ex. 20:1-7; Luke 10:25-28). This requires total commitment and undivided loyalty to Christ. We cannot be loyal to Him and to other gods or idols as well. After all, the Bridegroom has promised to be with us always and to supply all our needs out of His riches!

Today there is so much infidelity, disloyalty, etc., both within society and in the Church. Sometimes Christians use the expressions "church-hopping" and "transfer growth" – people leaving a church because of offences; because there are "better churches elsewhere", or for some other reason. Often the root of the problem is that Christians are looking for what they can **get** from a church rather than what they can **give**! In a marriage relationship there is both give and take – and this should be more or less equal. (Not, "You give and I take"!)

Think about all that God did for the Israelites in the Old Testament, yet still Israel forsook God and followed after other gods; hence the captivity and division of the nation. See, for example, the book of Judges; Solomon (1 Kings 11:1-13); Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 20:31-37); Judas Iscariot; Demas (Philemon 24; 2 Tim. 4:10).

The Bible assures us that "He (God) will never fail you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5-6; a quote from Joshua 1:5). Or, as David said to Solomon, "Be strong and of good courage, and act. Do not be afraid or dismayed, for the Lord God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you" (1 Chronicles 28:20).

Jesus likens the Father to the father in the story of the prodigal son. He gives us everything; often we squander it; but He patiently waits for our return and welcomes us back with open arms and a feast! And aren't we like that? After all God has done for us, don't we sometimes turn our backs on Him, squander His good gifts to us, and yet He is waiting and willing to receive us back to Himself with open arms – and a feast!

Many Christians start well but don't end well because of "Gold" (money and possessions), "Girls" (immorality) and "Glory" (pride). Even Christian leaders have fallen because they have given in to these temptations. See 2 Corinthians 11:2-4.

We need to learn to be faithful through thick and thin. Another part of the marriage vows promises to be faithful "... in good times and bad; whether richer or poorer; in sickness and in health ..." This means in easy, joyful, wonderful times as well as tough times and dark times. See Job 1:20-22; 2:9-10.

Naomi, a Jewess, and her daughter-in-law Ruth, a Moabitess, lived through some difficult times after their husbands died. But when Naomi felt that it was best for Ruth to go back to her own people, Ruth replied with the immortal words: "Intreat me not to leave thee or to return from following after thee. For whither thou goest, I will go and where thou lodgest, I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people and thy God my God. Where thou diest, will I die and there will I be buried. The Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me" (Ruth 1:16-17 AV. Only the AV adequately expresses the passion and determination of these words!). Ultimately this led to the marriage of Ruth to Boaz, and eventually the Messiah was born, a descendant of Ruth, because of her faithfulness!

Oh that every Christian who is part of the Bride of Christ might say these same words to Jesus Christ the Bridegroom! He has promised His faithfulness, provision, guidance and protection. Will we affirm our faithfulness to Him, not only in words but also in actions?

Think also of Paul and all that he suffered, right up to martyrdom, for the sake of his Lord. See 2 Corinthians 11:23-28 (in spite of the miracles he also saw!) He was faithful to His Master in spite of threats, persecution, torture, imprisonment and martyrdom – and so were many other Christians in the early Church, throughout the history of the Christian Church, and even today!

Unfaithfulness begins when you take your eyes off your own wife or husband and long for or lust after another. We need to be very careful what we see and long for; what our heart and emotions desire, and the thoughts we think. (What we see, think and feel). We need to guard against lustful, deceiving, adulterous and idolatrous spirits which seek to lead us astray – both from our own husband or wife, if we are married, or from the Lord. Many people who once walked with the Lord, today are walking with other "partners", in idolatry and deception.

God said, "It is not good for man to live alone" (Gen. 2:18). Therefore:

1 man + 1 woman (physically) **or** 1 person + 1 God (spiritually)

As human beings we need both physical and spiritual relationships and we need to be faithful in both our physical and spiritual relationships.

The Bridegroom leads; the Bride follows. This requires commitment, obedience and mutual submission, which are so important. In the natural, "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord" (Eph. 5:22) **and** "Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the Church" (Eph. 5:25).

Excuses not to be obedient and committed to following the Lord are really disobedience!

Loyalty, faithfulness and commitment apply within the Church as well as between us and the Lord. There is a real discipline in being a Christian who is faithful and true, even through difficult times. (Notice how similar the words "disciple" and "discipline" are!)

The false “bride”

The Bible also refers to the great harlot (prostitute) in Revelation 17:1-6.

A prostitute is a false “bride” (one who stands in the place of the true bride). Similarly, the false prophet, the false beast and the false “Christ” (or anti-Christ) arise as Satan tries to make himself equal to God. The true Bride will always be faithful and true to the Bridegroom; the harlot will not.

Characteristics of a prostitute:

- Unfaithful, not true
- Lust, not love
- Take, not give (**requires** the blood of the saints; cf. Jesus **gave** His blood)
- Short term, not permanent relationship
- Uncommitted, not a life-long commitment
- Self-centred, not self-sacrificing

Worldliness, the flesh and the devil; witchcraft and satanism; false cults and religions; idolatry; indeed anything that will separate us, the Bride, from the Bridegroom, must be avoided at all costs. We must remain true to Him Who purchased and cleansed us by His own precious Blood.

As in the world, so in the spirit, we can choose faithfulness or unfaithfulness. Our Heavenly Bridegroom will return for a faithful Bride – one who waits for, and longs for, His coming! Are we ready?

QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean to be “faithful”?
2. In what ways does God show His faithfulness to us?
3. Why do many people today find it so difficult to be faithful?
4. Spiritually, what is the “false Bride”?
5. What are some of the idols which keep us from a close and true relationship with the Lord?
6. Are we ready for the coming of the Bridegroom? What can we do to make ourselves ready?

9

THE BRIDEGROOM: PREPARES A HOME

John 14:1-7

Jesus said, "Don't let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in Me. In My Father's house there are many dwelling places. If this was not the case, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and will take you with Me, so that where I am, you will be also. You know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to Him, "Lord, we don't know where You are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus replied, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No-one comes to God the Father except through Me. If you know Me, you will also know My Father. From now on you do know Him, and have seen Him."

In this beautiful passage Jesus told His disciples that He was going to leave them and prepare a place in Heaven for them. He said that they would know the way. But when Thomas said he didn't know the way, Jesus said that the only way for anyone to come to God the Father – to have eternal life, and live with God forever in glory – is to come through Him. Only the Bride of Christ will live with Christ forever. If we reject the Bridegroom, we can't expect to live with Him! This is why faith in Jesus Christ is essential for salvation – you can't "have Him" and "reject Him" at the same time!

Assurance

The above Scripture summarises the wonderful hope we have as Christians. Sometimes this world seems very evil and very tough, and we long for a place where there is no sin and evil, and where we will see the Bridegroom "face to face" – not through a veil, but face to face! (Just like the veil being removed from the bride in a wedding service and she sees her husband face to face!)

If we have received Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, and have been born again by His Spirit, we have the assurance of our salvation and eternal destiny!

Four characteristics of Home

The Bridegroom has gone to prepare a home for His Bride. Then He will return to take her back with Him to the home He has prepared. There are four very important characteristics of a good home:

1. Home is where the heart is!

A good home should be characterised by love, unity, acceptance, support and encouragement. We may travel to many different parts of the world but home is where our

heart is – amongst our loved ones. When we see Heaven, we will never want to be anywhere else!

2. Home is where those nearest and dearest live

Our family – all our Christian brothers and sisters – will be with us there in glory. There are “many rooms” in the house Jesus has gone to prepare – room for everyone who has been saved by His grace and washed in His blood. Brothers and sisters from all over the world, and from all through the centuries, will be gathered there to celebrate; love and worship God; and love and bless one another.

3. Home is where you can relax and find rest

At last we will be able to enter into the fulness of the rest that God has promised us. See Matthew 11:28-30 and Hebrews chapters 3 and 4. Even in this world there is a rest that comes through faith in God – yes, in spite of all the pressures we face! But in Heaven, the rest will be complete and perfect – no more anxieties, pressures, busyness, deadlines to meet, etc. There we can truly relax and find rest and refreshment. While we may read Psalm 23 here on earth, and especially relate to verses 4 and 5, the rest of the Psalm will find its deepest and truest fulfillment in the life to come.

4. Home is where you can be happy and enjoy life

Many people live in expensive houses but they may not be happy homes! Sadly, wealth and prosperity here on earth do not guarantee happiness and enjoyment in our homes. But when Christ returns and takes us to be with Him forever, it will be “joy unspeakable – and full of glory!”

Yes, He will come again and take us to be with Him in our **new** home – forever! “So that where I am, there you will be also.”

There ought to be a tremendous sense of excitement and expectation as we wait for the Bridegroom to return. Are we ready? Is there an eager expectation?

Who may come?

“The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come!’ And let all who hear say, ‘Come!’ And let those who are thirsty, come and drink of the water of life freely and without price” (Rev. 22:17). Home is for **all** who will come! The invitation is to us. The opportunity is ours. The choice is ours. **Come!**

In the first two chapters of the Bible we read of the beauty and perfection of the world God created (Gen. 1, 2). In the last two chapters of the Bible we read of the beauty and perfection of the place Christ has gone to prepare for us (Rev. 21, 22). But what happened in between? The fall of mankind and the results of fallen mankind! Sin entered the world and spoiled what God had made, and what God intended for us to enjoy. From Genesis 3

(the fall of man) to Revelation 20, we read of the horrors of sin, sickness, death and destruction. But this will not last forever. Jesus has died to redeem us – buy us back from sin and slavery to the world, the flesh and the devil – and when He returns He will take His Bride to be with Him forever in glory!

The Bridegroom is coming!

The following Scriptures both tell us of the coming of the Bridegroom and also of the need for the Bride to be ready. When He comes, it will be too late to start getting ready. We need to be ready and waiting now!

- Matthew 25:1-13 The wise and the foolish bridesmaids.
- John 14:1-7 Jesus is the only way to the Father and eternal life.
- Acts 1:6-11 The return of Jesus foretold.
- 1 Cor 15:35-58 The resurrection of Christ, the resurrection of the dead and the resurrection body.
- 1 Thess 4:13-18 The second coming of Jesus.
- Rev 21, 22 The new Heaven, the new Earth and the new Jerusalem.

What do we learn from the above? First, that God is calling us to be wise – ready, waiting and prepared for His coming. It will be too late to prepare when He comes; we need to be ready now!

Second, Jesus Christ is the **only** way to eternal life and to God the Father. There is no other way of salvation except through the atoning death of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Good works cannot save us. Other religions and other gods cannot save us. Not everyone will be saved – only those who put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and follow Him as their Lord and Saviour.

Third, Jesus Himself promised that He would return. Just as His first coming was foretold in the Old Testament, so His second coming is foretold in the New Testament.

Fourth, Jesus' resurrection from the dead was necessary, not only because He is the Son of God and it is impossible for death to hold Him (Acts 2:24) but also because it shows us that just as He was raised from the dead, with a new, resurrection body, so we also will be raised from the dead with a new body. Just as He lives for evermore, so we will live for evermore!

Fifth, Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us in glory – a new home where we will be with Him forever!

QUESTIONS

1. Jesus said, "You know the way to the place where I am going." What is the way and what is the place?
2. In what ways is Heaven like a good home?

3. This study lists four characteristics of a good home. What other characteristics can you think of?
4. What similarities are there between the first two chapters of the Bible and the last two chapters?
5. The history of the Bible could be summed up in four words: Creation, The Fall, Redemption, and Eternal Life. How would you explain to a new Christian what each of these mean?
6. "Our eternal salvation is not earned by us – it has been bought for us". What does this mean?

10

THE BRIDE: MAKES HERSELF READY

Before a marriage, there is a lot of preparation that needs to go on, especially by the bride! The Bible says "The marriage of the Lamb has come and His Bride has made herself ready" (Rev. 19:7) but how do we, the Bride of Christ, prepare ourselves for the coming Bridegroom?

Clean and pure

We need to be clean and pure, but every one of us has sinned and done many, many things which we know the Bridegroom does not approve of. Praise God He has prepared a way by which we can be restored to being clean and pure once more, through the shed blood of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Yes, the Bride can still "be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure, for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints" (Rev. 19:7-8). Not that we are righteous in ourselves, but when our sins are taken away we can stand before the Bridegroom, clean and pure. ***Praise God!***

Paul describes the Bride, the Church, as being presented to the Bridegroom "in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, ... holy and without blemish". How? Because Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the Word (Eph. 5:25-27).

Revelation 21:27 says that nothing unclean will enter the Holy City, where the Bride and Bridegroom dwell – only those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. When we are born again and washed in the blood of the Lamb, our names are written in the Book of Life, our sins are washed away and we are made fit for the Kingdom of Heaven.

Mature

The bride does not get married until she is mature. As we wait for the coming Bridegroom we need to do all we can to become mature in the things of God. We need to learn, understand and live by His Word. We need to learn how to communicate with God through prayer. We need to develop the gifts He has already given us. We need to be busy doing those things He has told us to do here on earth. We need to be talking to people about our Bridegroom-to-be!

Totally committed

While the bride awaits the coming marriage day, there needs to be total commitment to her spouse. The “promise” was made the day we received Christ as our Lord and Saviour. He is committed to us – we must be committed to Him. There is no room for flirting with other suitors – the world, the flesh or the devil. No room for other lovers, other gods, other competitors. We must live only for Him. Our loyalty must not be divided. We must be whole hearted for the One to whom we are engaged.

Prepared

Unlike most wedding days, the Bridegroom knows the “day and the hour” when He will come for the Bride, but she doesn’t! We must be prepared for Him to come at any hour.

The parable of the ten bridesmaids (Matt 25:1-13) especially illustrates this point. The Bridegroom may seem to be delayed. He may come much later than we expect. But we must be ready at any time. ***No-one knows how much longer they may live.*** We could pass into eternity at any moment. And even if He does come back while we are still alive on earth, no-one knows when that will be.

Are we prepared? Are our “lamps trimmed”? Are our lamps “full of oil”, burning brightly, ready?

Adorned

Have you ever seen a bride who was not “beautiful”? The beauty Jesus seeks as He returns for His Bride is more than just an outer beauty – it is an inner radiance and beauty that comes through being full of the Holy Spirit and with a passionate love for Jesus. “Aglow with the Spirit”, as it says in Romans 12:11.

Revelation 21:2 describes the Holy City (the people of God) as “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband”. Verse 11 speaks of her having “the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel”. The most beautiful Bride ever seen – fit for the King of kings!

Willing, waiting, eager

There is always an eager excitement about marriage. Perhaps a little uncertainty, but also an overwhelming excitement and expectation as the Bride waits for her Bridegroom. There is a willingness, a waiting, an eagerness to be with the one she loves, forever!

Ready and waiting!

The Bride has made herself ready. Am I ready for the coming of the Lord? If He returned today, would I greet Him with a sense of eager expectation? Are my wedding garments white? Am I totally committed to Him and Him alone? Am I prepared?

Doing what pleases Him

Two thousand years ago Jesus spoke of His return. This is a very long time to wait! Billions of people have lived and died since He spoke of His return. Still we wait.

But we should not be waiting idly for Him to come. We need to be busy about the Lord's business, doing those things He has told us to do; doing those things which please Him. We need to be occupied, waiting and ready! Jesus said, "Occupy until I come" (Luke 19:12-13).

"Behold, the Bridegroom comes" at an hour we do not know and a time we do not expect. Are we ready?

QUESTIONS

1. How ready and prepared do you think most Christians are for the coming of the Bridegroom?
2. How ready and prepared am I?
3. What should we be doing while we wait for His coming?
4. How can sinful people enter God's Holy City – the place where God dwells? How can we be clothed in white garments, when we have already soiled our garments?
5. Why does Jesus seem to have delayed His return? (2 Peter 3:8-10)
6. Since Jesus *is* going to return, what sort of people ought we to be? (2 Peter 3:11-13)

11

THE BRIDEGROOM AND BRIDE: LOVINGLY DEVOTED

What is love?

This is probably the most abused word in the English language!

Love is earnestly, sincerely wanting the best for another person and being prepared to pay the price for it.

How much does God love every one of us? Jesus said that “God loved the world so much that He gave His only begotten Son (Jesus) so that whoever believes in Him will not perish but will have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

How much should we love God and other people? See 1 John 4:7-21. **This** is what love really means!

Love usually also includes a real sense of intimacy. In Song of Solomon 2:16 it is expressed this way: “My Beloved is mine and I am His, and His banner over me is Love”.

1 Corinthians 13:4-8a says “Love is ...

- Patient – prepared to wait
- Kind – thoughtful and generous
- Not envious or jealous – pleased when good things happen to others and they are blessed; sad when bad things happen to them. Not “Why doesn’t it ever happen to me?” or “It serves them right!”
- Not boastful – not centred on “me” and what “I” have done
- Not arrogant – blatantly proud
- Not rude – not crude, vulgar or insulting
- Not selfish or insisting on its own way – centred on other people, not self-centred
- Not irritable – does not allow little things to annoy
- Not resentful
- Not glad when things go wrong
- Love rejoices in truth
- Love bears, believes, hopes, endures
- Love never ends

These are characteristics of God’s love for us; therefore **we** should manifest love in these ways too! We often extol these virtues of love but don’t do much about making sure they are characteristics of the way **we** live!

Note:

1. **Because** God loves us and is patient, this does **not** imply that He tolerates evil. God is “patient”, to a point, with evil but will not withhold His anger forever. “The Lord is not slow about fulfilling His promise, as some people think of slowness, but is patient towards us, not wanting anyone to perish but wanting everyone to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).

2. **Because** God loves us, He is angry at sin – whatever spoils what is good. Therefore He must punish sin and turn away from sin. For example, God is grieved over the Church because of:

- Sin
- Disunity
- Worldliness and compromise
- Lack of faith
- Not walking in the Spirit
- Lack of commitment
- Failure to share our faith

All these things hurt love (Titus 2:11-14).

3. **Because** God loves us, He is “jealous” of the truth and “insists” on us following the right way.

THE BRIDE: RESPONDS TO LOVE, WITH LOVE

The Bride is lovingly devoted to the Bridegroom and responds to His love, with love! A bride talks about her husband. “We cannot but tell” (Acts 4:19-20; 5:27-29). Every bride wants to talk about her husband! In the same way we should **want** to talk about the Lord (and He wants us to talk about Him too!) See Matthew 28:18-20 and Mark 16:15-20.

Sharing our faith: “Four Spiritual Laws”

1. God loves us with an everlasting, perfect love
2. Sin separates us from God and this grieves God
3. Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty for our sin
4. When we repent and ask God’s forgiveness, He forgives us, we are saved and we become part of His Bride

Love is wanting the very best for another person **and** doing all we can to bring that about. Works, not just words! As many a person has said to their spouse: “Don’t just say you love me, **show me** you love me!” Love involves action, not just words!

The Bible speaks of faith **and** works (see Romans **and** James). Love without action is like theology without a relationship with God.

Devotion is being totally committed to someone, in a way which resists anything that would interfere with, or harm, that relationship. “You cannot serve God **and** ...” (Matt. 6:24).

How and why we love

Love should be natural, spontaneous and genuine; out of the heart. We love God because He first loved us. We love others because of the love God has put into our hearts for them.

It is interesting to note the difference between romantic love in the Western culture and in the Eastern culture:

Western culture:

- Loves out of the heart, not just out of the head.
- Loves out of devotion, not just out of duty.
- Loves out of choice, not out of compulsion.

Eastern culture:

The bride “learns to love, honour and obey” the husband who has been chosen for her.

But God chose us to be His bride! We love Him because He first loved us! And His love is irresistible to us!

We should love one another in the same way. Jesus said, “By this all men will know you are My disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).

How do we love when ...

- We disagree with the other person?
- The other person hurts us?
- The other person sins?
- We get no (positive) response from the other person?
- The other person leaves us or cuts off the relationship?
- The other person is “unlovely” or hard to love?

These are very real questions, to which we, as Christians, need God’s answers!

THE BRIDE: WORSHIPS THE BRIDEGROOM

Finally, the Bride of Christ loves, serves and obeys her Bridegroom. She loves Him, she adores Him, she honours and respects Him. She worships Him!

She “sings His praises” – singing Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (Eph. 5:18-20).

See 2 Chronicles 5:11-14 where the people saw the glory of the Lord even in **Old** Testament times!

See Zephaniah 3:17. We often sing His praises, but here the **Bridegroom** rejoices over His **Bride** and **He** rejoices over **her** with singing!

See Revelation chapters 4, 5, 21 and 22. Worship around the Throne where there is no more sin, sickness, sadness, death, pain or sorrow – only the redeemed and their Redeemer – the Bridegroom and His Bride, forever!

Hallelujah!

QUESTIONS

Under the heading, “**How do we love when ...**” there are six questions. How ***should*** a Christian respond in each of these situations? Illustrate your answers with examples or verses from the Bible, ***and*** from your own personal experiences. Be practical; be real and be honest!

12

THE BRIDEGROOM AND BRIDE: UNITED AND FRUITFUL

United

The ultimate in unity is seen in the nature of God Himself: Father, Son and Spirit – One God.

One in Spirit, one in purpose, one in power and authority – but manifest to us in different ways (especially Jesus, Who came in the flesh and dwelt amongst us as a Man).

Jesus said, “I and the Father are One” (John 10:30). He also said, “I only do what I see the Father doing” (John 5:19-20, 30; 8:28).

God also wants to be one with us, His Bride, and He wants us to be one with each other – one Bride (that is, one Body) and one Bridegroom! (John 17:11, 21).

Humanly speaking, unity between Bridegroom and Bride (husband and wife) is one of the hardest things to achieve and maintain! Pride, selfishness and stubbornness are some of the main reasons for division and disunity. No wonder Jesus spent His “longest” prayer (John 17) praying for unity.

Paul reminds us that “We, who are many, are one body”! (Rom. 12:3-8). In Christ there is also unity between Jew and Gentile (Rom. 11:17-24; Eph. 2:11-22).

- In Genesis 1 & 2 there was unity.
- In Genesis 3 there was disunity because of disobedience. Because God is holy, Adam and Eve's sin and disobedience made them incompatible with a holy God (sin and holiness are like oil and water). Adam and Eve were therefore cast out of the Garden of Eden and became separated from the intimate unity and fellowship they had previously had with God.
- In Revelation 21 & 22 there will again be unity within the pure Bride, and between the Bride and Bridegroom. Conversely there will be separation from everything which is impure. This is why there is a Heaven (where the Bridegroom and Bride are in perfect unity and harmony; where there is no sin) and a Hell (where all that is unclean and sinful are eternally separated from God)

God desires unity in the Church (the Bride), between churches, and between Christians (but **not** unity with the world – worldliness!) We are “One body with many members” (1 Cor. 12:12-26) but we are also called to be separate from the world which does not love God (2 Corinthians 6:14 - 7:1).

God also desires unity within the Body: unity between men and women; Christians of different ages, races and customs; rich and poor – because we are all one with the same God! In Christ there is neither male nor female; bond nor free; rich nor poor; Jew nor Gentile – we are all one in Christ Jesus (1 Cor. 12:12-13; Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11).

The longest recorded prayer of Jesus is found in John 17. The main theme of this prayer of intercession for us is that we might be **one with each other and one with Him!**

Marriage and the family

Unity brings fruitfulness. From the unity of the Bride and Bridegroom comes child-bearing. God wants the Church to reproduce through fellowship with Him and outreach (mission). He does not want a spiritually barren Church. When we are one, and we are one with Him, fruitfulness, multiplication and growth will follow.

Three things the world will always use to accuse the Church are:

- Disunity (denominationalism, different doctrines, church splits, etc)
- Sin (especially in leadership – pride, embezzlement, immorality, etc.)
- Hypocrisy (Matt. 7:1-5)

Let us make sure we give the world no excuse for not believing! Unity between all Christians, and unity with the Lord, are essential. The Bride and the Bridegroom are to be one.

Where there are differences and divisions we must make reconciliation and put things right. We might not necessarily agree with everything that other Christians do or believe, but if we are true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ then we are one and we must live and act as one. There is only **one** Bride of Christ! (Similarly, husbands and wives are called to live together like the Bridegroom and the Bride!)

Out of this unity will come fruitfulness. Jesus prayed for us, saying, “I do not ask on behalf of these [Christians; His disciples] alone, but for those who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one, even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me” (John 17:20-21).

Physical unity between a husband and wife brings forth children. God’s desire is that spiritual unity between all believers and the Bridegroom will also bring forth a spiritual harvest of children for the Kingdom. May nothing hinder this relationship!

Are we ready?

In Matthew 25:1-13 Jesus told a story which illustrates the necessity for us to be prepared, waiting and ready for the coming of the Bridegroom. The question we must all ask ourselves is “Am I ready for the coming of the Bridegroom?” We don’t know when He will return. Am I ready? Is the Church ready? Don’t be like the foolish bridesmaids who were not prepared, ready and waiting, and as a result did not get into the wedding feast!

The final coming of the Bridegroom for His Bride is described more fully in Revelation chapters 21 and 22, which you are encouraged to read. As you read, sense the excitement – the exhilaration – of the marriage of the Lamb, the Heavenly Bridegroom, to the Bride, the Body of Christ!

“The Spirit and the Bride say ‘Come!’ Let everyone who hears say ‘Come!’ Let everyone who is thirsty, come! Let everyone who wishes, take the water of life without cost” (Rev. 22:17). Jesus Christ has paid the price so that everyone who is thirsty for everlasting life can come and be a part of the Bride of Christ. **Come!**

“As the Bridegroom rejoices over his Bride, so your God will rejoice over you!” (Isaiah 62:5).

QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the obstacles to Christian unity?
2. How can each of these obstacles be overcome?
3. Why is unity within the Church so important? Can Christians really be united with Christ if they are not truly united with each other?
4. What is one key to spiritual fruitfulness and the growth of the Church?
5. To what extent is the Church ready for the coming of the Bridegroom?
6. Am I ready for the coming of the Bridegroom?

CONCLUSION

I am sure we all have a lot of work to do – working at our marriages and unity in the home and family, as well as working at unity in the Body of Christ – not just in our own individual churches but the Church as a whole!

This is not easy, as we all know. But it is what God wants and it is infinitely worthwhile.

Jesus is coming back for one glorious Bride! And oh the joy of that occasion when the Bride has made herself ready and the Bridegroom returns!

Are we ready? Am I ready? No-one knows the day or the hour when He will return, so we need to be always ready, waiting for that glorious moment.

We need to deal with the issues that divide us – in the home and family, and in the family of God. These issues divide and spoil and can conquer us if we are not actively dealing with them.

We need to ...

Pray as though it all depends on God, *and*
Work as though it all depends on us!

May God enable us all to be ready, waiting, prepared and pure for the time when the Bridegroom returns and calls His Bride to come and live in His Home!

God bless you as you prepare and wait for His coming!

“I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall be joyful in my God, for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a Bridegroom decks himself with ornaments and as a Bride adorns herself with her jewels”
Isaiah 61:10

The Spirit and the Bride say “Come!” Let those who hear say “Come!” Let those who are thirsty come. Whoever will, let them take the water of Life freely! Revelation 22:17

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