

Marriage

In past Sunday School lessons I've often commented on the importance of "bookends." "Bookends" are there deliberately to inform a reader what that book is all about. So for example, Paul opens his letter to the Romans with "obedience" and he closes his letter with "obedience." We thus should conclude that the theme of that letter is that both Jews and Gentiles are commanded to obey the Gospel. Well, the Bible itself has bookends. It opens with verses on marriage (Genesis 2:24), and it closes with a marriage (Revelation 19:6-9). We should therefore understand that in the Bible, marriage is a very important theme. But what exactly is its meaning? We need to discuss this, because it's key to understanding Christianity.

It's more than curious that God, the ultimate author of Scripture, should begin His book with something on marriage. It therefore must be that marriage has a transcending significance that we're to discover as we read on. But let's observe now that marital sexual union is the most sacred relationship that God created. It's right there, deliberately, in the creation narrative. Husband and wife share intimacy, union, and commitment, indeed, they share their lives as "one flesh." Marriage is also there in the Ten Commandments: "Thou shalt not commit adultery" means, in its positive sense, that husband and wife are to be so ardently faithful to each other that they eschew *anything* that might interfere with their unity. Although the Genesis text doesn't make it explicit (many other texts do), any expression of sexuality *not* in the context of marriage is illicit. That would include a long list of practices such as fornication, adultery, homosexuality, pornography, rape, and anything lewd or promiscuous; these all can be termed *porneia*, which is anathema to God.

It was a Hebrew marital custom that the father of the groom was responsible for finding a suitable bride for his son. (This is the story of Genesis 24, the Bible's meta-narrative in miniature.) In other words, marriages were arranged. A price would be paid for the bride. Marriages were to be monogamous, and they were to be permanent; that is, no divorce. The husband was regarded as the protector and provider as well as the decision-maker, while the wife was manager of the household and free to engage in righteous activities (thus Proverbs 31:10ff).

The Song of Songs is an anthology of Hebrew poems based on Genesis 2:24. Using symbolism extensively, it expresses marital love, in which Solomon is an idealized son of David, representing Israel's future King and Messiah. We don't need to do exposition of this Book here, but all throughout the reader should understand that what's being extolled is a true life passed in a permanent, exclusive union of one man and one woman in procreative marriage. Hosea presents a failed marriage. Solomon here poetically presents a successful one. Why is this Book in the Bible? Because marriage is a metaphor for the relationship between God and His people. Marriages in this life prefigure or anticipate an ultimate future "marriage," in which God takes a bride from among His fallen and sinful human creatures, sanctifies and transforms them, and gives them to the Son to be forever in intimate, loving union.

Marriage is to be contrasted with "the great lie," which holds that instead of loving marital union, on offer is a non-stop, no-consequence orgy with the whore of Babylon (Revelation 17-18). All humanity has two options, and only these two: We either identify as the people of God united to Him by faith in His great promises, or we're by default identified with that wicked woman who sits on a scarlet beast covered with blasphemous names and who holds a golden cup filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries.

As theologian, Paul undoubtedly reflected long on Genesis 2:24, the Song, O.T. passages such as the identification of idolatry as spiritual adultery in Ezekiel and Hosea, perhaps also Jesus' parable in Mttw 22:1-14 and His reference to the Pharisees as an "adulterous generation." So Paul reveals that "Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior" (Ephesians 5:23). A parallel is drawn between the shared life of husband with wife and Christ with the Church. The metaphor of marriage includes faithfulness and love, for sure; but more important to Paul is intimate union.

The union that marriage represents is huge in Paul's theology. We need to explore it. Paul's, "**It is no longer I who live, but Christ liveth in me**" (Galatians 2:20) is key to understanding the Gospel and the entire Christian life and worldview.

Union with Christ parallels the unity of the Godhead. Our focus in Christian theology on trinitarianism easily causes us to lose the inescapable fact that God is one. The three Persons of the Trinity are a perfect unity, joined together in love and joy and singleness of purpose. Just as there's unity in the Godhead, there's unity of Christ with His Body, the church, and there's a unity of all believers in the Body. The divisions of the church (denominations, according to ethnicity, according to particular doctrines, etc) are not merely regrettable, they are fundamentally incompatible with the essential one-ness of God, to whom we're united. All believers are united by the baptism of the Spirit into Christ. Unity isn't something we

try to attain, a goal that's theoretical but in practice difficult or impossible to achieve; our unity has already been achieved. **"You are all one in Christ Jesus"** (Galatians 3:28). Unity is something that we're to grow into as we mature in our faith. The absence of visible unity is because we refuse to go on to maturity.

Our union with Christ is the very basis of our salvation. To be "in Christ" is like being in the ark during the Flood, so when the horrible judgments come, we're safe in Him. But it's more, much more. Our justification, regeneration, adoption, and glorification are because we're *in Christ*. His perfect obedience and His perfect righteousness are ours because we're *in Christ*. We enjoy such benefits of His atonement as reconciliation with God and a new relationship with Him because we're *in Christ*. We have eternal life because the resurrected Christ has eternal life and, as we're *in Christ*, we have His life. We're delivered from the iron grip of Satan because Christ at the cross defeated Satan and, as we're *in Christ*, we share in His victory. We are loved by the Father because we're *in* the beloved Son. The Son brings us into heaven so we can (in some way yet to be revealed) participate in the Godhead. All spiritual blessing is because of being *in Christ*.

There's more to union with Christ, and it's not just theology but it directly concerns how we live. A gift of being in Christ is to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit. But the Spirit doesn't just lead us to become better Christians. The Spirit makes it possible for us to inhabit and embody Christ. This isn't the same as imitating Christ, which Paul does encourage in several places. The indwelling Spirit empowers us to "put on Christ," which means we allow Christ to live out His life in us, we allow Christ to reveal His beautiful and perfect Person in us. We serve God in the power of Christ. We do what Christ would do. We say what Christ would say. Our motives, our thoughts, our values are all those of Christ. Our lives are to be transformed into the Jesus whose identity we share. How does this happen? It's not mystical. It happens by first taking in, and then living out the Word of God. Thus, for example, we read, "Don't gossip." Having a heart to obey the Word when tempted, the Spirit explains that gossip only exalts self, and Christ wants us to show love instead. So we refrain. Or this example: "Don't grumble," we read. So when a deserving occasion arises, as we have a heart instead to obey the Word, the Spirit leads us to reflect on God's sovereign rule, which leads us to rejoice and be at peace.

To the believers at Ephesus, Paul wrote, **"Put on the new man, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness"** (Ephesians 4:24). And to the believers at Colosse, **"Put on the new self"** (Colossians 3:10). These verses are at the core of salvation, for they reveal what it means to be a Christian. The "new man" in these verses is Christ Jesus. To be a Christian means Christ Himself is living in us. But Paul tells us we have to do it!!! There's nothing passive about being a Christian; we're not inert bystanders. We have to work at it. The process is called sanctification, and it's our responsibility. The Spirit empowers us to do it. But we need to yield to the Spirit and not quench or grieve the Spirit, because if we do, the humble Spirit of Christ leaves us in immaturity.

"Put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature" (Colossians 3:5). Parallel to sanctification is mortification, which is abandoning sin. Our sin nature is dead, having been put to death at the cross by our participation with Christ (Romans Chapter 6). So we don't have to sin, but we can if we want to (or if we don't care). The Spirit of Christ empowers us to not sin if, again, we're yielded to Him.

"Since then you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God . . . For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:1). Our union with Christ, symbolized by the union of husband and wife, not only accomplishes for us all that's needed for our salvation, it enables us to live this life to the glory of God. It enables us to be holy. And it enables us to bear fruit for God. We show Jesus how precious He is to us by reflecting Him in our own lives. But we have to want these things; they don't occur automatically. And *nothing* happens if all we care about is attending church and being in heaven when we die: a wasted life.

Nothing in today's evangelical churches even remotely resembles the kind of life Christ enjoined on us, His followers: **"Anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it"** (Matthew 10:38-39). The "sacrifice" of Abraham and Isaac (in Genesis 22), sacrifice that didn't actually happen, is now demanded of all who follow Jesus, intensified or heightened to actual death by martyrdom. Self-sacrifice is the norm of Christianity, expected of all believers. Why? Because identification with Christ means we're in such intimate union with Christ that His self-sacrifice for others is ours, His love for others is ours, His humility is ours, His obedience to God is ours, and His kind of trust in God is ours. And hatred of Him is ours too. He lives His life again, in me and in you.

May today's Sunday School lesson initiate in all of us a hunger and thirst for the reality of biblical Christianity, for the reality of knowing Christ, whom to know is life eternal. Blessings.