

The Worshipping Bride 10-1-17

My favorite time of the week is Sunday morning. Yea, I gotta go to work on Sunday, but about 8:15, when I emerge from my office it no longer feels anything like work. It is so sweet to greet and meet and see my brothers and sisters. And then the worship. Wow! It is just my favorite thing. There is nothing more satisfying to me than to sing God's praises with the North Park family, and yet it also engenders in me a deep sense of longing for something beyond, albeit something similar for which I long with an even deeper yearning. We read of it in Revelation 5, John's vision of heaven in which he beholds the Lamb who's name was Lion, standing as if slain and **8-14**

When He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. 9 And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. 10 "You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth." 11 Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, 12 saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing." 13 And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, "To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever. 14 And the four living creatures kept saying, "Amen." And the elders fell down and worshiped.

Can you imagine what this must be like? Can you put yourself here in the midst of this heavenly scene? I have often said that our worship in the church is like a foretaste of heaven. That is true, but it's only a taste. Some days we get a bigger bite than others, don't we? Many of the older guys in our church attended a Promise Keepers meeting back in the 90s, and the thing that grips you most in those meetings is the worship. Singing the praises of God with 20,000 or 40,000 lovers of Jesus is just an awesome, awesome thing. I think it's pretty awesome to sing with a few hundred here at our church. But consider what it will be like in glory brethren? Just consider the sheer number of the singers. Verse 11 says there will be myriads of myriads. Now, what's a myriad? I looked it up and it means 10,000. The NIV says 10,000s times 10,000s and 1000s times 1000. We are talking 100s of millions of angels and creatures and redeemed people worshipping God together all in one place. Every one of them in full voice, every one of them in full spirit, with all their energies and adoration devoted in one direction to proclaim the worthiness of Jesus Christ. We can

only dream of what that will sound like. In Revelation 19 the apostle tries to describe it this way 19:6 *Then I heard something like the voice of a great multitude and like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, saying, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns."* Try that with me. HALLELUJAH! FOR THE LORD OUR GOD THE ALMIGHTY REIGNS. Not bad, but it doesn't compare to the songs and shouts of heaven to come. Billions gathered around the throne of eternal majesty saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb!"

But notice, something else extraordinary is described here. 13 *And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, "To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever."* Do you see anything unusual about that Verse? Who is saying this? Who pronounces this doxology? I'd better ask, "What is saying this?" John says this was said by every created **thing**. Sometimes at our church we sing, *"All creatures of our God and King, lift up your voice and with us sing."* But we don't expect it to happen. I mean, **every created thing** covers a broad spectrum. We are talking here about singing trees, and rock and hippos and gators, and moons and stars. Oh, we understand the notion of how the heavens proclaim the glory of God! We read that and think, "Oh yes, when you understand who made the stars, and the moon and the mountains, you know that all these things testify to God's greatness." But, in heaven John says, in the presence of Christ, we will actually hear them. Peter, Paul and Mary sing a song that says, *All God's critters got a place in the choir, some sing low, some sing higher, some sing out loud on the telephone wire.* C.S. Lewis sometimes will write about other worlds in which the animals can talk, maybe even the trees. There is communication going on between them and their Lord and he touches upon a biblical truth there. St. Francis of Assisi, who wrote the hymn, "All Creatures of our God and King" is famous for his blessing of the animals. Francis was a man who, in his prayers was enabled to see that even the creatures testify to God's praise. When we are alive in God's spirit, this is part of it. I heard from a friend one time about how she was intensely gripped by the Lord at a prayer meeting. And when she went outside she saw the moon and was transfixed by its magnificence. That is the kind of thing that happens to young lovers, and it happens to us too when we are in love with God and alive to His presence. We can virtually hear the creation shouting out our Maker's praise. I long to be more alive and alert to the praises of creation. What John says here in Verse 13 is not fairy tale. This is reality. John heard it. He didn't imagine it. He didn't dream it.

In Revelation 5 John was in touch with reality to a degree that few, if any, of us have ever been. His account is that of a man seeing things as they really are. Revelation 5 seems ethereal to us but it is more real than anything we experience now. Now, we see in a mirror dimly, now we perceive reality in shades and shadows. When our eyes are illumined by the presence of Christ we will come to see and hear so many things we never heard or saw before. Entering into the joy of our Master will be like waking up from a long dream and those spiritual realities of which we speak will be more real and clear than the nose on your face. I'll never forget one day during my devotions I was reading Revelation about the worship of God's redeemed and it seemed to me as though I were there. The Holy Spirit of God made it alive to me. Put me right there in it. I could see that the world that was real is the one of Revelation 4 and 5 and 19. It all hit me powerfully as I was reading, not this chapter, but the 19th. And I want to take you there for the next few minutes. I hope the Holy Spirit will take us all there for the next few minutes. **1-7**

After these things I heard something like a loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying, "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God; 2 BECAUSE HIS JUDGMENTS ARE TRUE AND RIGHTEOUS; for He has judged the great harlot who was corrupting the earth with her immorality, and HE HAS AVENGED THE BLOOD OF HIS BOND-SERVANTS ON HER." 3 And a second time they said, "Hallelujah! HER SMOKE RISES UP FOREVER AND EVER. And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who sits on the throne saying, "Amen. Hallelujah!" 5 And a voice came from the throne, saying, "Give praise to our God, all you His bond-servants, you who fear Him, the small and the great." 6 Then I heard something like the voice of a great multitude and like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, saying, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. 7 "Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready."

Wow! I think we need to sit here and breathe in the air of heaven for a little while. Here we get a look at this notion of the marriage of the Lamb. How can mortals even talk about this? I feel like we ought to take off our shoes. To think that we (I mean, look around this room here. We are nothing special in ourselves) to think that we are going to be married to the Lord Jesus. We will be His bride. To contemplate that is to know joy unspeakable and full of glory. It is virtually beyond belief. It would be the height of blasphemy to speak in this way except that God, God speaks in this way. Isaiah 62:**5c** *As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so your God will rejoice over you.* And will we rejoice over Him? Oh, what joy we will have! There is among young lovers a powerful mutual delight. You look at two people in love and they're always making goo-goo eyes at each other aren't they? They are just so fascinated in their relationship. They are lost in wonder,

love and praise. That is how God describes our future. One glorious day our Jesus will carry us over the threshold into a new level of intimacy and joy!

Now, one may well say, "Hey, I thought we were already the bride of Christ. Why do we speak of the marriage of the lamb as a future thing?" We speak that way because that is how it is portrayed in Scripture. In the days of Christ, there were two landmark events related to marriage. The first was betrothal. The bride and the groom are committed to each other, the promises are made. But then, sometime later came the feast and the celebration and the consummation of that union. We live presently in the time between betrothal and consummation. Christ Jesus has made us His beloved. He has pledged Himself to us already. Like Mary and Joseph, we are already legally joined, but the fullness of that union still awaits us. Paul wrote in II Corinthians 11:2 *For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin.* You get the picture there don't you? We are engaged to the Lord. The wedding date is set. We don't know when it is, but we are to live as if it's tomorrow. We are to make ourselves ready. I've often told the story of my buddy Wayne at seminary. Just a couple of weeks before Wayne and I graduated from seminary I noticed that he was in the school's weight room working out. And I was surprised. That weight room had been there for almost two years and I had never seen Wayne in there. So, I asked him, "Hey Wayne, what's the occasion?" And Wayne reminded me, that he had a wedding date ahead just after graduation. Now, that's a great picture isn't it, of what is ahead for us. Someday soon, we are going to graduate to glory, and right after that we are going to get married. So, what are we supposed to be doing right now? Getting in shape for the big day! Working out for Jesus. There is a Bible verse that says that isn't there? Philippians 2:12 *Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.* Isn't that great! God wants us working out, developing our spiritual muscles, toning up the body of Christ for the day we are presented before the Prince of Glory. Paul says, "I want to present you pure on that day" Back to Revelation 19:7 *Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready.* His bride has made herself ready. Every good woman heading into marriage with the man she loves wants to be her best. She wants to be as beautiful as she can be. Some may work out, some not, but **every** woman headed for the altar cares about her dress. As a father of three daughters I discovered, to my astonishment, that some girls start thinking of what they want for a wedding gown years before their time. Even before they like boys they like

wedding dresses, and they want to make sure that on this big day in their lives, they will be gorgeous. And there is a lesson here for Christ's church. If we are to be his bride. Let's get ready.

What does that mean practically? Well, it means we have to find ourselves a dress. And Revelation 19:**8** *It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.* Now, I will put this in the context of our sermon series on the Mission Statement of our church which we close out today with this meditation on worship. We endeavor to make disciples of Jesus who worship God passionately, connect with each other in caring community and impact the world through word and deed. And, as we do that, as we honor the great commission of our Master, we are putting on the dress which will adorn us for the great day. Every righteous deed, every testimony shared, every dime ever given, every kind word ever uttered, we should see as a way to beautify ourselves for Jesus. Now, if you know the gospel, you understand that, by no means, will these righteous deeds make us acceptable before God. In and of themselves, apart from the cleansing work of the Lamb Himself, our best efforts adorn us like dirty rags. The Bride of Christ will not be dressed in the clothes of Pharisees. Look at Revelation 7:**9-10** *After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; 10 and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."* Then in verse **13-14** *Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "These who are clothed in the white robes, who are they, and where have they come from? 14 I said to him, "My lord, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."* Think on what this means. The fine linen for our bridal gown is the righteous acts of the saints. Those righteous acts, in themselves, are filthy but now they are bright and clean - washed in the blood of the Lamb. When they are performed in Christ, for Christ, through Christ and by the power of Christ our good deeds please the Father and beautify the bride of His Son. And they are all part of the Father's gift. Notice the first four words of Revelation 19: 8 *"And it was given"*. Isaiah 61:**10** *I will rejoice greatly in the LORD, my soul will exult in my God; for **He** has clothed me with garments of salvation, **He** has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels."*

We rejoice because the Lord does it. He provides the robe, He provides the blood, He provides the adornment. But although He does all these things there is still a responsibility for the bride isn't there? The bride has to take these gifts and dress up in them. Our text says in Verse 7 that the bride has made herself ready. This is our job. Scripture affirms what Reformed theology has always taught that men and God work together in the process of sanctification. The Lord has supplied all we need, but now we must put it on. We are responsible to make the bride of Jesus, lovely and pure to the end that she can worship the Lord passionately and purely. Paul said, "*I want to present you as pure.*" Oh my goodness, this is an awesome challenge for church leaders. We are the caretakers of the bride of Jesus Christ. But it is for every member of the church as well. Do you remember what John the Baptist was called of God to do? In Luke 1, we are told twice that John was a man sent from God to ***make ready a people prepared for the Lord***. And that's our calling too. As part of Christ's church your concern is the purity of the bride of Christ; that she not be given over to any other lovers, that she not be polluted with sin and corruption, that she become healthy and vibrant so that she can worship her Lord in time and eternity. This is the end-goal of all that we do as a church. This is the ultimate motivation for our deacons and elders and ushers and Sunday School teachers, for our small-group leaders and nursery workers, for our musicians and sound technicians. Whatever your place is, whatever your gifts and calling, it is time to invest in preparing a worshipping people, a bride for the Lord. It's not just about helping a local institution survive or thrive, it is engaging in the grand purpose of creation and redemption. I am not embarrassed to urge you to do your part. To help prepare His Bride with your own unique contribution is why the Lord made you. It is your purpose and your destiny.

And then, may I mention one other concern. If this image, this metaphor of the church being the bride of Jesus means anything, surely it means that we are to be a people in love with the Lord. I don't know about you guys, but the top two requirements I had for a wife, were #1 she had to be a Christian, pure of heart, serving the Lord, and secondly she had to be in love with me. I think it's fair to say Jesus has the same interests. He wants a bride that is in love with Him, that she wants to spend time with Him, and that she is ready to adore Him for all eternity. He won't be content with anything less, don't you be content with anything less either. There was a couple went to see their pastor for marriage counseling. After hearing of their troubles, the pastor suddenly arose from his seat, grabbed the wife and gave her a warm, passionate kiss. He then turned to the husband and said to him, "Sir, that is what your wife needs, about three times a week." The stunned husband

stammered and said, “But, Pastor, I can only bring her here on Mondays.” No-no-no. Too many are like that, they only show up once a week to watch the pastor get passionate about Jesus. But you, you run hard after a relationship of intimacy and sweetness with your Lord. How I love the closing two verses of a hymn by Anne Cousin, on the glory of heaven. She writes *Oh, I am my Beloved’s and my Beloved’s mine! He brings a poor vile sinner, into His house of wine. I stand upon His merit, I know no other stand. Not e’en where glory dwelleth, in Immanuel’s land. The Bride eyes not her garment, but her dear Bridegroom’s face. I will not gaze at glory, but on my King of grace. Not at the crown He giveth, but on His pierced hand. The Lamb is all the glory of Immanuel’s land.* To gaze upon this king of grace, whose beauty will be our joy forever, is the privilege and pleasure of His bride. So, I challenge you brothers and sisters that you invest with God's people not only in service and in purity, but also in passionate praise -- for the Holy Lamb of God. Let's pray.

Oh God, forgive those of us who are guilty of losing our first love, of growing lukewarm, and rather than spitting us out of your mouth, we ask that you heat us up. Make us the kind of Bride we ought to be: pure, lovely, and hopefully devoted in love to You. We thank You for the robes of your righteousness, for the blood that washes us clean, for the promise of marital bliss in glory to come. Meet with us Lord and thrill us with your beauty and your grace as we worship You. Give us spiritual ears and spiritual eyes to hear the songs of heaven and the songs of nature mixed with ours in a symphony of praise. And now send us forth in devotion to our calling to prepare for you a people, and to make North Park Church a pure, healthy and pleasing Bride unto the praise of the Lamb.