

## Introduction to Volume Two of the Bible Study for Married Couples: Marriage in the New Testament

Welcome to volume two of Marriage in the Bible, a series provided by Marriage in Christ. Over the course of the next 14 months or so, we will pray as married couples through key New Testament texts. We won't simply list every single time marriage is mentioned, but rather seek personal encounters with the Scriptures that will help married couples draw closer to the Lord as individuals and as couples. Our vocation in marriage gives us a special grace for this closeness, for marriage itself is the great sign of God's love for his people and Christ's love for his bride, the Church.

The marriage covenant is analogous to the covenant that God makes with Israel. In fact, the covenant that God made with his people on Mount Sinai was nothing less than a divine wedding. God united himself to his people in a sacred family bond. God is the bridegroom; his people are the bride.

The relationship between God and the twelve tribes of Israel is a flesh-and-blood relationship; they are family. The covenant was sealed with the blood of sacrificed animals and reached a climax with a heavenly banquet, a wedding feast (see Exodus 24:4-11). From that moment on the prophets saw the relationship between God and his people as equivalent to the one between husband and wife. God is the faithful husband, but Israel, his spouse, is faithless. Israel's idolatry and relentless pursuit of other gods was likened to adultery. Their long exile was likened to divorce, a state that had lost merriment and joy, symbolized by wine.

The wine dries up, the vine languishes, all the merry-hearted sigh. <sup>8</sup> The mirth of the timbrels is stilled, the noise of the jubilant has ceased, the mirth of the lyre is stilled. <sup>9</sup> No longer do they drink wine with singing; strong drink is bitter to those who drink it. <sup>10</sup> The city of chaos is broken down, every house is shut up so that no one can enter. <sup>11</sup> There is an outcry in the streets for lack of wine; all joy has reached its eventide; the gladness of the earth is banished. (Isaiah 24:7-11)

But God does not give up on his wayward bride. The story does not end with divorce and exile. This comes through loud and clear in passage after passage. The prophets speak about the day when God will forgive her (Hosea 2:14-20). He will cleanse her and purify her (Ezekiel 36:25; 37:23). He will give her a beautiful wedding garment, and he will take his bride to himself. There will be a great party, with the finest food and wine (Isaiah 25). The hills will run with wine (Amos 9:13). There will be great joy on that day, the wedding feast of God. For as the Lord said in Jeremiah, "I have loved you with an everlasting love" (31:3).

So it is clear that one way to read the Bible is to see it as a divine love story. It is the story of a man head over heels in love with a woman.

You have ravished my heart, my sister, my bride, you have ravished my heart with a glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace. <sup>10</sup> How sweet is your love, my sister, my bride! how much better is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your oils than any spice! (Song of Solomon 4:9-10)

But the man is no ordinary husband; he is the Creator God of the universe. And the woman is no ordinary bride; she is the people God has chosen to make his own. The bride is, first, the 12 tribes of Israel; then, in Christ, the bride is the Church.

There are many ways to describe biblical hope for the age to come, the age of salvation. One of the most frequent ways is the new covenant between the God of Israel and his estranged spouse. Ancient Israel longed for the future wedding of God. As one scholar puts it, “All of human history is a story of divine love—given, betrayed, forgiven and renewed because of the mercy and compassion of God.”<sup>1</sup>

Song of Songs ends with the bride waiting for the bridegroom (God) to come. At the time of Jesus, the Jews “were not just waiting for the kingdom of God, or the coming of the Messiah, or the restoration of the twelve tribes. Above all, they were waiting for the coming of the Bridegroom God of Israel, who will forgive their sins and unite them in an everlasting covenant.”<sup>2</sup>

So it is entirely fitting that John the Baptist announces that the long-awaited Bridegroom has indeed arrived.

“You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.’”<sup>29</sup> He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled.” (John 3:28-29)

Jesus is the Bridegroom! The new covenant between God and Israel is a marriage covenant. God showers his bride with the bridal gifts of steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness. It culminates with the wedding feast of the Lamb.

Each month we will provide an overall introduction to the Scripture passages and meditations for that month. The introduction will provide historical background, as well as theological and literary context, for the passages we will offer for your prayer together.

By reading, praying over, and talking about key marriage passages in the Bible, we will come to delight more in God's vision for this wonderful state in life. Our 21st-century approach to marriage is no more Christian than was the approach of the pagan culture of the first-century Roman Empire or the pagan world that Israel struggled with for all its history. The authors of the Scriptures challenged the first Christians to live as if the New Creation was bursting out in Rome, Corinth, Jerusalem, and other places in the ancient Mediterranean world. So, too, the New Creation is bursting out today in cities and homes all over the world—and it dramatically challenges what the modern world has to offer.

When we read and pray with the Scriptures, we encounter Jesus as a couple. Let the Scriptures find you, heal you, challenge you, teach you. In all humility, let them show

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1 Pitre, Brant, *Jesus the Bridegroom: The Greatest Love Story Ever Told*, Image, New York, 2018, p.19.

2 *Jesus the Bridegroom*, 27.

you a new way to live human life—in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the heart of the body of Christ.

## **Part One: The Gospels**

One of the central truths of our faith is that God, who was free to do anything that he wanted, chose to do certain things. Those things that he did are considered “revelation,” for they reveal God to us. The Bible is the record of that revelation. It describes not only what God did, but what those actions mean. So, we begin by making five observations about the spousal imagery in the gospels.

The first observation is about the birth and childhood of Jesus. He was born to a human mother, raised in an ordinary human family. From one point of view, those actions are no more remarkable than our own births or those of our own children. Jesus was fully human, fully “ordinary.” We do not ignore the truth that the birth of this child was also truly remarkable, for it was also the birth of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. However, the God of Israel chose to enter human history as a small, defenseless child. The incarnate Son of God really did grow up in an ordinary human family. This gives great dignity to our ordinary human marriages and families.

That leads us to the second observation: the Incarnation is the marriage of the human and the divine in the person of Jesus. Jesus is not half-human, half-divine. He is one person with two natures. God and humanity are one in the person of Jesus. We will reflect throughout this study on the spousal implications of that great mystery.

The third observation is that God, in the Second Person of the Trinity, chose a family wedding to be the setting in which he would go public with his ministry (see John 2). Jesus’ sign of turning water into wine revealed his glory and the extravagance of his love, which would be revealed fully on the cross. He chose a wedding feast to be the first venue for revealing who he was.

Fourth, throughout his ministry, Jesus acted like the long-awaited Bridegroom. His interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well is a beautiful example of Jesus acting like the long-awaited Bridegroom of Israel.

Fifth, Jesus used the wedding feast as a parable for the Kingdom of God. In his various recountings of Israel’s story, he announced that the long-awaited wedding of God and his people was about to begin. The gospels and the entire New Testament proclaim that Jesus is the bridegroom; he is Israel’s God come to claim his bride. The long-awaited day of the Lord is here!

Here is a brief outline of part one of volume two: Marriage in the Gospels.

1. Birth and infancy
2. Incarnation (John 1 and John 3:25)
3. The Wedding Feast at Cana and John 13:1-4; 19:23-30
4. Jesus the bridegroom: the woman at the well (John 4)
5. The words of Jesus and Israel's story (various passages from the synoptic gospels)
6. Selected parables and actions of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke
7. Selected passages from the Gospel of John

### **Introduction to the Infancy Narratives**

The Bible dramatically opens with the Spirit of God hovering over a watery, chaotic, trackless void. Then God speaks. He orders the chaos; he creates heaven and earth as a place where he can dwell forever with those beings who bear his own image and likeness. But something goes terribly, tragically wrong, and the image bearers are exiled from the Garden. A new home, a new sacred space for God and man to dwell together, must be created. In a remarkable turn, the Creator God sends the same Spirit that once overshadowed a watery chaos to overshadow a young woman, a willing servant. In the person of her child, God reveals, in the most dramatic way imaginable, his desire to join heaven and earth. The two realities are not side by side, and one thing is not imposed on the other; rather, two natures will exist in one single person. That is the wonder of the Incarnation.

A historian loves puzzles, and there are many puzzles in the stories of Jesus's conception, birth, and hidden life in Nazareth. Historians debate the nature and date of the census that led Joseph to take Mary to Bethlehem, where Jesus was born. Pious fiction and sentimental Christmas stories, going all the way back to the year 200 AD, have added layers of misinterpretation to the rather straightforward pictures presented by the evangelists. Here is just a sampling of the puzzles that arise. Is it even possible to think that in a culture that holds hospitality as one of the preeminent social virtues, a young expectant mother would be turned out to have a baby on her own, in a barn? Could a town of David not find room for an heir of David? These things are not likely! Why would Mary's cousins who lived five or six miles away not have come to help Mary at the time of the birth of Jesus? It's hard to believe that someone of Joseph's stature and obvious kindness would be so clueless as to bring his pregnant wife on a long journey where she gave birth on the night of their arrival. Who were these mysterious visitors from the East? There is no extrabiblical mention of the slaughter of the Holy Innocents. What does that say about the historicity of Matthew's account?

None of these puzzles should surprise us or cause us concern. All historical records that rely on human memory have details that are often remembered with varying degrees of precision— not unlike those “facts” in our own families that are remembered differently by different family members—all with complete confidence! We say they are puzzles for the historian, because Jesus’ birth was a matter of the historical record. It was an event in human history. He was born during the reign of Caesar Augustus, when Herod the Great was the king of the Jews.

But there are certain aspects of these events about which the historian can say very little. The historian can tell us when and where Jesus was born, who his mother was, etc. But the historian cannot tell us who his real Father is or that his mother Mary was a virgin. Only the inspired author can tell us that Mary is the New Eve and that her child is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, “God with us.” Nevertheless, the Bible contains the record of real actions in human history—even those events which the historian can only perceive with the aid of faith.

More than that, the Bible tells us what those real actions mean. The evangelists tell us how the stories of Jesus’ conception, birth, and infancy fit into the long history of Israel. There are echoes of the Creation story and pointers to the New Creation. The evangelists tell us of the fulfillment of promises made to Abraham and David. We hear echoes of the Exodus (Jesus will return to Israel out of Egypt). We learn of the rescue of all humanity (represented by the non-Jewish magi), continuing the Old Testament story of the mysterious way in which the God of Israel rescues his chosen people, and through them, all humanity. The holy child is hunted and threatened with death; the end of the story is prefigured by the beginning.

Finally, Jesus was shaped by his human family. Luke puts it this way: “Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor” (Luke 2:51-52). Joseph and Mary were his parents; as such, they were responsible for teaching him and shaping his character. From his mother Mary he doubtless learned boundless compassion for the oppressed and that God’s grace and mercy are for all human beings, including Gentiles. It is beyond doubt that living with and learning from this remarkable woman shaped Jesus’ teaching, fostered in him his great respect for women, and prepared him to make women such an important part of his ministry (see our reflection on Luke 1:46-55). From Joseph he must have learned that there are two kinds of justice: justice that comes from the law and the kind of justice found in the prophets (see our reflection on Matthew 1:18-25).