

God's Love Story

**Deepening Our Relationship With God
by Studying a Biblical Metanarrative**



Marissa Martin

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Chapter 1: Tell Me A Story

*The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who
arranged a marriage for his son.*

Matthew 22:2, NKJV

A very long time ago, there was a great King and His Son who lived in magnificent splendor. They were all-powerful in their realm, so powerful that when they spoke it became reality. You would have thought they had everything they could want, but they decided there was something missing. They wanted a bigger family.

So the King and Prince came up with a daring plan. They would create something new: a Bride for the Prince. She would not be a servant, but someone who could be an equal and friend. It was a risky plan, though, for to create the type of family they wanted the Bride needed to have the power of choice. She would have the opportunity to decide whether she wanted to be adopted by the King and marry the Prince.

Some time earlier, one of the King's servants decided he wanted to rule and tried to overthrow the king. It did not work, of course, but he was still around making trouble. When he heard of the King and Prince's plan, he told the Bride she could not trust the King and lured her away. He turned the palace the King built for her into a prison, and deceived her into thinking he was on her

side.

The King and the Prince were not caught off-guard, though. Anticipating their adversary's move, the Prince already had a plan to rescue His bride. First, He visited her prison to let her know that He was coming to rescue her. She responded enthusiastically and they became engaged, but shortly after that she forgot about His promises and broke every one of the King's laws. This made the Prince and the King very sad, because they knew if she wouldn't let them rescue her, she would have to die for her lawbreaking. Justice demanded it.

Finally, the time came for the Prince to break into his Bride's prison. He didn't come in his all-powerful form and just take her away by force, though, because the laws she broke meant she deserved a death penalty. Instead of making her pay that price, the Prince let the enemy take him prisoner, torture him, and kill him in the Bride's place.

When the adversary killed the Prince, it marked the adversary's final defeat. Once the Prince had paid the Bride's debt and freed her, there was nothing left that the adversary could use against Him. The King used his power to bring his son back to life, and they set about preparing for the wedding. While waiting for the wedding, the Bride stayed in the prison the adversary had made. Knowing he had been defeated, the adversary did all he could to take her eyes off her Prince again. This time, however, she did not

forget what the Prince had done for her and He continued to protect her while she waited patiently for Him.

When the palace was ready to welcome the Bride, the King sent His Son to bring her home. He went back to the adversary's strong hold, this time as a warrior shining with power. He threw down the walls, vanquished every foe, and brought His bride home. Alone no longer, with their enemy out of the picture, the King and the Prince and his Bride lived happily ever after.

Storytelling

When I was growing up in the Church, I don't recall hearing the Bible called a story of love. Once I was old enough to stop reading Bible storybooks with pictures, I don't remember ever hearing the Bible described as a story or a narrative at all. This is partly, I think, because we do not want to risk making the Bible sound fictional.

I also didn't hear the "love" part emphasized very much. Even though we frequently acknowledge that "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16), many people I met seemed to read that statement as so simple that they could just accept it and move on to something else, like prophecy studies or theology debates. Yet, in essence, the entire Bible is about the Father preparing a bride (i.e. the church) for an eternity-long relationship with Him and His Son. I find it a great comfort and encouragement to think of my Savior as a loving

redeemer-husband who longs for me (and all His people) to marry Him and become part of the God-family.

There are several reasons I use the word “story” to describe the Biblical account. A story is an account of real or imaginary people and events, usually with a narrative structure. Originally, the word “story” in English referred to true narratives and was used “most frequently with reference to a narrative drawn from the Bible or a saint's life.”¹ Even today, the modern idea of “story” includes truth as well as fiction, a use often seen when someone talks about the story of their life.² People use stories to explain the mysterious, pass on knowledge to their children, and share their inner thoughts. We tell or hear stories every time we communicate with another person, and many of us compulsively search out more stories in film, writing, or music. Storytelling is a captivating and necessary art.

I am not suggesting that the Bible is fictional when I say that it is written as a story. I mean that God has given it a narrative structure. More specifically, there are several metanarratives (overarching stories or big themes) that you can see when reading the whole Bible. I write about one, "A Story of Battle and Victory," in my book *Like An Anchor Study Guide: Armor of God*.

¹ OED (n.d.) “story, n., sense 1.a.” In *Oxford English Dictionary*. Retrieved July 2023 from <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8625402088>.

² OED (n.d.) “story, n., sense 5.b.” In *Oxford English Dictionary*. Retrieved July 2023 from <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8625402088>.

The love story we're looking at today is another.

One reason we gravitate towards tales of heroism, rescue, and love is that there is a basic need in our souls for a relationship with God and His Son. Stories where the handsome prince rides up and rescues the fair princess speak to our longing to know the Prince of Peace, who laid down His life to rescue His bride from captivity to sin. Jesus Christ is the most powerful, most loving, and most perfect hero-lover to ever exist, far surpassing even the most ambitious human attempts to fashion a story's hero. The Bible is a living, dynamic book that includes instruction, history, prophecy, and a revelation of the plan of God. When taken all together, the overarching framework is a story. My personal theory is that our idea of what makes a good story comes from the sequential narrative God uses to reveal His plan.

What Is a Hero?

My favorite English professor at The Ohio State University had an interesting definition for hero. If Marissa runs out in front of a truck to rescue Little Timmy, he said in class, and she's killed saving Timmy's life I'll feel very bad about that, but she won't be a hero. Saving Timmy was a split-second decision. A hero is someone who has time to think about their actions and understands what their heroism will cost. How many of you, he asked the class, would run into a burning building to save Little Timmy if you

knew for a fact that 1) you would die, but 2) you would save Timmy's life? In both classes where he used this example, not one person raised their hand.

Jesus Christ is that hero. Peter tells us that we were redeemed “with precious blood, as of a lamb without blemish or spot, the blood of Christ, who was foreknown indeed before the foundation of the world, but was revealed in this last age for your sake” (1 Pet. 1:19-20, WEB). This indicates Jesus knew before He and His Father created us that He might have to die to redeem humanity. He had thousands of years to think about His actions and knew full well what His sacrifice would involve. Even at the last minute, He could have changed his mind. When arrested right before His crucifixion, Jesus said, “do you think that I couldn’t ask my Father, and he would even now send me more than twelve legions of angels? How then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that it must be so?” (Matt. 26:53-54, WEB). Jesus could have backed out, but He chose to follow-through on the promises that God had been making for centuries to redeem His people.

“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ... No one takes it away from me, but I lay it down of my own free will. I have the authority to lay it down, and I have the authority to take it back

*again. This commandment I received from my
Father.”*

John 10:14-15, 18, NET

Jesus was not forced to give up His life. It was a conscious choice He made to fulfill God's plan. Knowing He was the only One Who could do this, He gave Himself willingly. That is what makes it a story of love: “God demonstrates his own love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8, NET).

Chapter 2: God in the Old Testament

I can't count how many times I have heard people say that the God of the Old Testament was angry and vengeful while the God of the New Testament is peaceful and loving. But it's all the same God! There wasn't a change in deity from the Old to New Covenant. The Bible is one continuous narrative.

We often like to think of Jesus Christ taking away the harshness of the Old Testament when He took the penalty for our sins upon Himself. But though that might sound nice, God reveals Himself as unchanging. Part of what makes Him God is that He doesn't turn into a different person every few thousand years. James tells us “there is no variation or the slightest hint of change” in the Father (Jam. 1:17, NET). God is who He is—that is how He defines Himself (Ex. 3:14). So how did a God who ordered death by stoning for crimes including witchcraft, adultery, and murder change so drastically that when Jesus came in the flesh, He stopped the Pharisees from executing a woman caught “in the very act” of adultery (John 8:4)?

If we let the Bible interpret the Bible, we find no contradiction. God is (and has always been) full of both mercy and justice. God doesn't change, and “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8, WEB). The problem is in misreading the Bible. To portray God in the New Testament as only defined by peace and love is to ignore verses talking about

His just recompense for sin. He not only knows “how to deliver the godly out of temptations,” but He will also “reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment” (2 Pet. 2:9, NKJV). Similarly, to say that God in the Old Testament was mean ignores the fact that He revealed Himself to Moses as, “Yahweh, a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness and truth” (Ex. 34:6, WEB). (Note: in Ex. 3:15, God tells Moses that Yahweh is “my name forever,” and He gives Moses permission to use that name. It is typically translated “LORD,” but the WEB uses “Yahweh” to distinguish His personal name from the title Lord.)

God is love and mercy, but He is also justice and judgment. The apostle Paul says that because God is righteous, He will judge the world (Rom. 3:5-6). In fact, a large portion of the first three chapters of Romans is devoted to a discussion of God's righteous judgment against those who persist in sin. His righteousness includes punishment for sin, which is the transgression of His law. This fact did not change between the Old Testament and the New. God is consistently multi-dimensional, and in both Old and New Testaments He is a God of love as much as He is a God of judgment.

Love has always been integral to God's relationship with His people. The commandments Christ called greatest (Matt. 22:37-39; Mark 12:29-31) are contained in the law delivered to

Moses. He commanded ancient Israel, “You must love the LORD your God with your whole mind, your whole being, and all your strength” and “you must love your neighbor as yourself” (Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18, NET). God's conversation with the Israelites about love was not limited to instructions on how they were to love Him and others. He also declared His great love for them.

“For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”

Deuteronomy 7:6-8, NKJV

This emphasis on love makes perfect sense when you realize that the God who spoke with Israel was the same being who came to this world as Jesus Christ. John tells us that, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was fully God. The Word was with God in the beginning”

(John 1:1-2, NET). The Greek word here is *logos*, which represents Christ “as the Second Person of the Godhead who is the eternal expression of the divine intelligence and the disclosure of the divine essence.”³ As the Word, Jesus Christ is the One who dealt with the children of Israel and spoke with His chosen people.⁴

In addition to His role as the expression of the Godhead's thoughts, Jesus Christ was personally involved in the creation of humankind. In Revelation 3:14, He is called “the Beginning of the creation of God” (NKJV) which “literally refers to Him as the originator or cause of creation.”⁵ This is repeated in Colossians.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation, for all things in heaven and on earth were created in him—all things, whether visible or invisible, whether thrones or dominions, whether principalities or powers—all things were created through him and for him. He himself is before all things and all things are held together in him.

Colossians 1:15-17, NET

³ “Zodhiates, S. (1992). “3056. λόγος.” In *The Complete Wordstudy Dictionary: For A Deeper Understanding of the Word* (entry 3056). AMG Publishers..

⁴ Additional evidence of this can be found in John 8:56-58 and 1 Cor. 10:4, 9.

⁵ Footnote to Rev. 3:14 *Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible*. Ed. Spiros Zodhiates. Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1991. King James Version.

Reading these verses, it makes sense that the member of the God-family who performed the act of creation is the same Word who entered into a marriage covenant with the Children of Israel and later died to create the New Covenant and save His bride from captivity to sin. That level of personal involvement as Emmanuel, “God with us” (Matt. 1:23, NET) demonstrates an unending, unchanging love throughout the entire history of mankind, and even sometime before that.

God's Love, Old Testament Style

Once I started reading the Old Testament seeking the God of love, I was surprised how many passionate declarations the Lord God makes of His love for His chosen people. I used to think the Old Testament was boring. It was filled with lists of who begat whom, instructions for constructing buildings that no longer exist, and obscure prophecies. There were some good stories, and I liked Psalms and Proverbs, but other than that reading the Old Testament was something I did because I thought I should, not because I wanted to. Then, something akin to the proverbial light bulb came on.

Instead of reading the Old Testament as a collection of lists, dry instruction, and prophecies I couldn't understand, I started reading God's words and trying to see Him. I knew if what the New Testament says about God's unchangeability is true, then the

God who I love in the New Testament is the same God I felt distant from in the Old Testament. With prayer and study, I started to realize that the incredible love story God is writing for us began long before the New Testament, and it is more wonderful than I had imagined.

In the next chapter, I will spend more time talking about what Paul called “a great mystery”—the parallels between human marriage and the Lord's relationship with His people. For now, I just want to touch on one aspect of this relationship that awed me when I first began this study.

In the books of prophecy, the Lord God talks to His people Israel, reminding them of the covenant they made when the Ten Commandments were delivered in Exodus. He compares the Israelites' unfaithfulness with a wife who “treacherously departs from her husband” (Jer. 3:20, WEB). As part of the judgment He promised to those who were disobedient, He said, “I will judge you, as women who break wedlock and shed blood are judged” (Ezek. 16:38, WEB). For breaking His covenant, the Israelites deserved death on a spiritual level, just as physical adultery was punished by physical death.⁶ But instead of condemning them, God promised to redeem His people from their sins and marry them

⁶ The death penalty for adultery is found in Lev. 20:10. God could choose to extend mercy, though, as He did by not killing King David for his adultery with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11-12).

again, establishing a New Covenant.

You will be a majestic crown in the hand of the LORD, a royal turban in the hand of your God. You will no longer be called, "Abandoned," and your land will no longer be called "Desolate." Indeed, you will be called "My Delight is in Her," and your land "Married." For the LORD will take delight in you, and your land will be married to him. ... As a bridegroom rejoices over a bride, so your God will rejoice over you."

Isaiah 62:3-5, NET

Can there be anything more beautiful than these promises? God is often accused of being unfairly harsh in His judgments, but how many human beings whose spouse was unfaithful would be as merciful towards them as the Lord is toward His unfaithful people? Israel "went up to every high hill and under every green tree to give herself like a prostitute to other gods" (Jer. 3:6, NET), yet even after Israel's public dismissal of God, He says, "I will allure her, will bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfort to her" (Hos. 2:14, KJV).

"I will betroth you to Me forever; yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice, in lovingkindness and mercy; I will betroth you to Me

in faithfulness, and you shall know the LORD. It shall come to pass in that day that I will answer," says the LORD; "... and I will have mercy on her who had not obtained mercy; then I will say to those who were not My people, 'You are My people!' and they shall say, 'You are my God!'"

Hosea 2:19-21, 23, NKJV

If these verses sound familiar, that might be because Peter applies them to the New Covenant church (1 Pet. 2:10). God did not change when the switch was made from the Old to the New Covenant, and neither did the relationship He wants to have with His people. The loving God we clearly see in the New Testament is the same God who spoke in the Old Testament. Jesus simply revealed more clearly who God has always been.

Chapter 3: A Great Mystery

That human marriage is supposed to model Jesus Christ's relationship with His church is a point well established in scripture. Trying to understand more fully what this means has fascinated me for several years, and will undoubtedly continue through many more Bible studies. Now that I am a newlywed (as I write this revised edition in Aug. 2023), I expect to learn even more about God as I try to honor Him in my marriage.

From the first chapter of Genesis, God's focus is on building family relationships. "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth," and as God created each part of the heavens and earth He declared "it was good" (Gen. 1:1, 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, WEB). Yet after creating man, the pinnacle of His creation, He said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make him a helper comparable to him" (Gen. 2:18, WEB). Though man was the part of God's creation made in His own image, man was "not good" by himself. The solution to this dilemma was the creation of woman.

In the King James Version, God's decision to create woman was infamously expressed, "I will make him an help meet for him" (Gen. 2:18). Often, people have mistakenly read this as "help-meet" and taken it as a degrading title. That couldn't be farther from the truth. The word translated "help" or "helper" is the

Hebrew word *ezer*.⁷ It means one who gives “aid or assistance,” “whether material or immaterial,” and is often used of the Lord's help for His people and for “the woman created as Adam's complementary helper.”⁸ God described Eve as the type of helper to Adam that He is to His people.

The phrase “meet for him” or “comparable to him” comes from the Hebrew word *neged*, a preposition meaning, in this case, “corresponding to,” indicating “Eve's likeness to Adam.”⁹ Eve was created as a helper to complete Adam, who was not good by himself. Marriage was the first human relationship God established as part of His creative process. It is only after creating both man and woman that God said, “everything that he had made ... was very good” (Gen. 1:31, WEB).

As the first relationship God established between people, marriage is far more than simply a solution for loneliness. When Paul wrote to the Ephesians concerning marriage, he quoted Genesis 2 to help support his point about the church and Jesus (Eph. 5:31-32). In that letter, Paul gives the relationship between Christ and the Church as a reason for the institution of marriage.

⁷ Strong, J. (2011). “5828. *ezer*.” In *The Strongest Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. Zondervan.

⁸ Baker, W. and Carpenter, E. (2003). “5828. *ezer*.” In *The Complete WordStudy Dictionary: Old Testament*. AMG Publishers.

⁹ Strong, J. (2011). “5048 *neged*.” In *The Strongest Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. Zondervan.

Just as Eve was formed from a part of Adam's body (a rib) so is the Church the body of Christ. Just as a husband and wife should become “one flesh” (Gen. 2:24, WEB), so should the Church be at one with Christ.

At One as the Body of Christ

There are many ways that Jesus shows His love for His people. We can see one example of His great love in the prayer He prayed before giving up His life for us. This prayer begins with a request that the Father glorify Him and acknowledgment of the authority the Father gave Him “over all humanity, so that he may give eternal life to everyone you have given him” (John 17:2, NET). He then defines eternal life as a relationship: “Now this is eternal life—that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you sent” (John 17:3, NET). When Jesus Christ and His Father offer us eternal life, they are offering a personal relationship with them.

In this final prayer, Christ did not focus on Himself. He prayed for His people. He asked, “Holy Father, keep them safe in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one just as we are one (John 17:11, NET). A little later, He expanded this prayer to include all believers, not only the disciples with Him at that time.

“I am not praying only on their behalf, but also on

behalf of those who believe in me through their testimony, that they will all be one, just as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. I pray that they will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me. The glory you gave to me I have given to them, that they may be one just as we are one—I in them and you in me—that they may be completely one, so that the world will know that you sent me, and you have loved them just as you have loved me.”

John 17:20-23, NET

There is a lot said in these three verses. When Jesus Christ was approaching His crucifixion, He prayed for us. He said that He gave the same glory His father gave to Him to those who believe so that it is possible for us to share God's oneness. He said the Father loves us just as He loves His own son.

I think that last point bears repeating. Jesus said the Father gives us the same love that He has towards His Son. He even said it twice, adding at the end of this prayer, “I made known your name to them, and I will continue to make it known, so that the love you have loved me with may be in them, and I may be in them” (John 17:26, NET). We've been spending quite a bit of time talking about how much Christ loves His church, but the Father also has that kind of endless love for the people who will marry

His Son. Both members of the Godhead want very much for us to be part of their family. One of the illustrations they use to describe how we become part of their family is marriage. Paul illustrates this in a lengthy passage in his letter to the church at Ephesus.

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord, because the husband is the head of the wife as also Christ is the head of the church (he himself being the savior of the body). But as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her to sanctify her by cleansing her with the washing of the water by the word, so that he may present the church to himself as glorious—not having a stain or wrinkle, or any such blemish, but holy and blameless. In the same way husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one has ever hated his own body, but he feeds it and takes care of it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of his body. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and will be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This mystery is great—but I am actually

speaking with reference to Christ and the church.

Ephesians 5:22-30, NET

We are called to be part of the church that belongs to Jesus Christ. The bride in this case is a collective group, “For just as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body—though many—are one body, so too is Christ” (1 Cor. 12:12, NET). The church is a body of believers gathered by God to become part of His family as His Son's wife. He laid the groundwork for that plan way back in the Old Testament with the covenants He made with His people.

The Lord's Marriage to Israel

The use of marriage as a symbol for the relationship between the Lord and His people runs through both the Old and New Testaments. As the Word who was “in the beginning with God,” the One who became Jesus Christ established the Old Covenant with ancient Israel (John 1:2, NKJV, see also 1 Cor. 10:4). The Ten Commandments were a type of wedding vows, to which Israel said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do” (Ex. 19:8, NKJV). As we saw in Chapter 2, this covenant relationship is mentioned repeatedly, particularly concerning Israel's unfaithfulness.

“Indeed, a time is coming,” says the LORD, “when I

will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. It will not be like the old covenant that I made with their ancestors when I delivered them from Egypt. For they violated that covenant, even though I was like a faithful husband to them,” says the LORD. “But I will make a new covenant with the whole nation of Israel after I plant them back in the land,” says the LORD. “I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts and minds. I will be their God and they will be my people.”

Jeremiah 31:31-33, NET

Though Israel forsook the Lord like an unfaithful wife, He is a divinely loving husband and did not cast her off entirely. Instead, He promised to redeem her and establish a new marriage covenant. The people of the Lord are told, “Don’t be afraid, for you will not be put to shame. Don’t be intimidated, for you will not be humiliated” (Isa. 54:4, NET).

“For your husband is the one who made you—the LORD of Heaven’s Armies is his name. He is your Protector, the Holy One of Israel. He is called ‘God of the entire earth.’ Indeed, the LORD will call you back like a wife who has been abandoned and suffers from depression, like a young wife when she has been rejected,” says your God. “For a short

time I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In a burst of anger I rejected you momentarily, but with lasting devotion I will have compassion on you," says your Protector, the LORD.

Isaiah 54:4-8, NET

Similarities between human marriages and the relationship between Christ and His church are not confined to the kind of love we share. Other parallels, which could easily be lost on modern readers, are seen in the Jewish marriage customs. Unlike an engagement in the Western world, betrothal carried the legal weight of marriage, although the couple did not live together until after the marriage ceremony was performed.¹⁰ During the betrothal period, the bride was considered "consecrated or sanctified, set apart exclusively for her bridegroom."¹¹ Ending a betrothal required divorce, and unfaithfulness was considered adultery (Matt. 1:19).¹²

In much the same manner, Paul speaks of the church being

¹⁰ Cohick, L. H. (2009). *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians*. Baker Academic. p. 62.

¹¹ Showers, R. (1990). Behold, The Bridegroom Comes, JEWISH MARRIAGE CUSTOMS. *The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc.*
https://www.ancientpath.net/Bible/Resources/res_JewishMCustoms.htm

¹² Cohick, L. H. (2009). *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians*. Baker Academic. p. 62.

“promised ... in marriage to one husband,” Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 11:2, NET). This is very similar to the wording in Hosea, where the Lord says, “I will betroth you to me forever. ... I will even betroth you to me in faithfulness” (Hos 2:19-20, WEB). Though we still wait for the time when our Lord will return to take the Church as His bride, we are betrothed to Him now, and we need to see ourselves as set apart exclusively for Him.

It is clear from scripture that Christ “purchased with his own blood” the Church whom He will marry (Acts 20:28, WEB). In keeping with the idea of a purchased, redeemed, bride, traditional Jewish marriage customs often included the concept of a bride price. “The prospective bridegroom would travel from his father's house to the home of the prospective bride” where he would negotiate with her father and settle the price he must “pay to purchase his bride.”¹³ In the interim between paying the bride price—marking an official betrothal wherein the bride belongs to the bridegroom—and the culmination of the marriage, the groom would prepare a home and the bride would make preparations for being a wife.

“I am going away to make ready a place for you,” Christ told His disciples the night He was betrayed, “And if I go and make ready a place for you, I will come again and take you to be

¹³ Showers, R. (1990). Behold, The Bridegroom Comes, JEWISH MARRIAGE CUSTOMS. *The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc.*
https://www.ancientpath.net/Bible/Resources/res_JewishMCustoms.htm

with me” (John 14:2-3, NET). This is a love-filled promise that He will not abandon His bride in a dangerous world. He will return to rescue her. In the meantime, our Lord has not forgotten us, but promises, “I will in no way leave you, neither will I in any way forsake you” (Heb. 13:5, WEB).

The betrothal period typically lasted about a year.¹⁴ It did not conclude until the groom's father decided his son's preparations were complete and gave permission for the groom to retrieve his bride. As both our Heavenly Father and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, God is the one who decides when His Son will return to claim His bride. Even the Son doesn't know when He's coming back (Mark 13:32; Matt. 24:36).

Much like we are ignorant concerning the exact time of Christ's return, Jewish brides did not know the exact time of the bridegroom's coming. However, she was always supposed to be ready for him to show up. Likewise, we are promised that our Redeemer will come for us, but we don't know when. That assurance should be enough for us to hold on to while we focus on making ready to marry Christ.

*He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord
GOD will wipe away tears from all faces; the rebuke*

¹⁴ Kay, G. (n.d.). Jewish Wedding Customs and the Bride of Messiah. *Grafted-in Ministries*. <http://messianicfellowship.50webs.com/wedding.html>

*of His people He will take away from all the earth;
for the Lord has spoken. And it will be said in that
day: "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for
Him, and He will save us. This is the LORD; we have
waited for Him; we will be glad and rejoice in His
salvation."*

Isaiah 25:8-9, NKJV

Chapter 4: Kinsman Redeemer

Earlier, when talking about God's love in the Old Testament, I left out one of my favorite passages so I could use it to open this chapter. This is the passage that made me fall in love with the book of Isaiah.

But now, thus says the LORD, who created you, O Jacob, and He who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; you are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I gave Egypt for your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in your place. Since you were precious in My sight, you have been honored, and I have loved you; therefore I will give men for you, and people for your life."

Isaiah 43:1-4, NKJV

Throughout the Bible, the Lord God's love for His people is declared in ransoming and redeeming them from captivity. Christ "gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for

good works” (Tit. 2:14, NKJV). There can be no love more passionate than that of Christ, who died to bring about reconciliation with the wife who forsook Him and who now lives to defend her, protect her, and bring her home. This relationship is part of “the joy that was set before Him” for which Jesus “endured the cross” (Heb. 12:2, NKJV).

Redeemer Customs

The story of Ruth is one of my favorites. There was a famine in Israel, so a man named Elimelech and his wife Naomi took their two sons and moved to Moab. The sons married women named Orpah and Ruth. Several years passed. Elimelech and his sons both died, and Naomi decided to return to Israel. She tried to convince her daughters-in-law to return to their own families, but Ruth clung to her mother-in-law and refused.

Ruth said, “Don’t urge me to leave you, and to return from following you, for where you go, I will go; and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God[a] my God. 17 Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May Yahweh do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me.”

Ruth 1:16-17, WEB

Impressed by Ruth's devotion, Naomi allowed her daughter-in-law to journey with her and they arrived in the city of Bethlehem at the time of the barley harvest. In the *Torah* (Law, or first five books of the Bible), God put a law in place instructing the Israelites to leave the gleanings of their harvest for “the poor and the resident foreigner” (Lev. 19:10, NET). With no other means of support, Ruth turned to this law for her and Naomi's sustenance. Ruth happened upon a field belonging to Boaz, a kinsman of her deceased father-in-law. When Boaz learned who was gleaning in his field, he told Ruth to remain with his workers during the harvest and promised he would protect her while she worked there.

When Ruth returned to Naomi and told her about Boaz's kindness, Naomi said, “May he be blessed by Yahweh, who has not abandoned his kindness to the living and to the dead,” then explained, “The man is a close relative to us, one of our near kinsmen.” (Ruth 2:20, WEB). The word translated “near kinsmen” is the Hebrew *ga'al*, which means “to redeem” or to act in the role of a kinsman, “that is, to be the next of kin (and as such to buy back a relative's property, marry his widow, etc.).”¹⁵ It can also be translated “avenger,” “ransom,” or “deliver.” Recognizing Boaz as the man whom God's law appointed as the legal redeemer for her family, Naomi counseled Ruth to ask Boaz to do the part of a

¹⁵ Strong, J. (2011). “1350 *ga'al*.” In *The Strongest Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. Zondervan.

kinsman.

As her mother-in-law instructed, Ruth went to Boaz at night and lay down at his feet. When he wondered why, she boldly asked him to marry her and fill the role of a kinsman redeemer. He blessed her for her kindness and virtue, and promised to care for her. In his commentary on Ruth, Matthew Henry says, “This may encourage us to lay ourselves by faith at the feet of Christ, that he is our near kinsman; having taken our nature upon him, he is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh.”¹⁶ As Matthew Henry points out, the story of Ruth is more than a beautiful love story between two people. It is an allegory of the redeeming love Christ shows for His church.

The role of *ga'al* included several rights related to redemption. A kinsman could redeem a possession that was sold (Lev. 25:25), purchase the freedom of one who was enslaved (Lev. 25:48-49), and avenge murder (Num. 35:19). In His redemptive work, our God accomplishes all these. The first redemption of God's people was accomplished when He freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

Therefore say to the children of Israel: “I am the LORD; I will bring you out from under the burdens

¹⁶ Henry, M. (1706-1721). Commentary on Ruth 3:1-5, II.1. In *MySword Bible* (version 13.0). [mobile app]. Riversoft Ministry. <https://www.mysword.info/>

*of the Egyptians, I will rescue you from their
bondage, and I will redeem you with an
outstretched arm and with great judgments. I will
take you as My people, and I will be your God.
Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God
who brings you out from under the burdens of the
Egyptians.”*

Exodus 6:6-7, NKJV

Jesus Christ, the Lord God, is a passionate redeemer-husband to His people. His great love for his espoused bride makes Him a “jealous God” (Ex. 34:14, Deut. 4:24) who says, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Heb. 13:5). Just as Israel of the Old Testament was redeemed from Egypt. Spiritual Israel (the church today; see Rom. 11) was redeemed from sin, purchased with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Redemption from Sin

In the New Testament, there are four words that can be translated “redeem.” The first is *agorazo*. It means to buy, as in a transaction that gives the buyer “the right of possession. In the redemptive work of Christ the idea is that Jesus, by offering Himself for us a due satisfaction, freed us from our liability in

paying it ourselves.”¹⁷ He gave Himself in payment of our debt, buying us back from slavery to sin.

And they sang a new song, saying: “You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth.”

Revelation 5:9-10, NKJV

The second word, *exagorazo*, is derived from the first. It means, “To buy out of, redeem from. ... The word generally means to buy up, to buy all that is anywhere to be bought, and not to allow the suitable moment to pass by unheeded but to make it one's own.”¹⁸ Here's an example of how Paul uses this word in relation to what Jesus does for us:

But when the appropriate time had come, God sent out his Son, born of a woman, born under the law,

¹⁷ *Agorazo* is used 31 times in the New Testament (NT) (see, for example, 1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23). Zodhiates, S. (1992). “59. ἀγοράζω.” In *The Complete Wordstudy Dictionary: For A Deeper Understanding of the Word*. AMG Publishers.

¹⁸ *Exagorazo* is used four times in the NT (see Gal. 3:13; Eph. 5:16; Col. 4:5). Zodhiates, S. (1992). “1805. ἐξαγοράζω.” In *The Complete Wordstudy Dictionary: For A Deeper Understanding of the Word*. AMG Publishers.

*to redeem those who were under the law, so that we
may be adopted as sons with full rights.*

Galatians 4:4-5, NET

The final two words are closely related linguistically. The first, *lutron*, means a “Ransom or price paid for redeeming captives, loosing them from their bonds and setting them at liberty.”¹⁹ It appears in only two verses, both of them in the gospels as a direct quote from Jesus: “the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45; Matt. 20:28, NET). Ransoming or redeeming us was one of His primary purposes in coming to earth.

The related word *lutroo* means “To bring forward a ransom ... to release on receipt of a ransom, to redeem ...[and] denotes that aspect of the Savior's work wherein He appears as the Redeemer of mankind from bondage.”²⁰

*Live out the time of your temporary residence here
in reverence. You know that from your empty way of
life inherited from your ancestors you were
ransomed—not by perishable things like silver or*

¹⁹ Zodhiates, S. (1992). “3083. λύτρον.” In *The Complete Wordstudy Dictionary: For A Deeper Understanding of the Word*. AMG Publishers.

²⁰ *Lutroo* is used three times in the NT (see Luke 24:21; Tit. 2:14). Zodhiates, S. (1992). “3084. λυτρόω.” In *The Complete Wordstudy Dictionary: For A Deeper Understanding of the Word*. AMG Publishers.

*gold, but by precious blood like that of an
unblemished and spotless lamb, namely Christ.*

1 Peter 1:17-18, NET

The two words we just looked at are both derived from *lutrosis*. Though it is not translated “redeemed,” it has a similar meaning: “to release on receipt of a ransom. The act of freeing or releasing, deliverance.”²¹ Taken all together, the picture New Testament writers paint using these words shows a bride held captive until a priceless ransom was paid by her Bridegroom. Sounds like something from a fairy tale, doesn't it?

*But now Christ has come as the high priest of the
good things to come. He passed through the greater
and more perfect tent not made with hands, that is,
not of this creation, and he entered once for all into
the Most Holy Place not by the blood of goats and
calves but by his own blood, and so he himself
secured eternal redemption.*

Hebrews 9:11-12, NET

Our savior personally offered Himself to buy us out of sin. With His life, he paid the price to redeem us from bondage. He

²¹ *Lutrosis* is used three times in NT (see Luke 1:68; 2:38). Zodhiates, S. (1992). “3085. λύτρωσις.” In *The Complete Wordstudy Dictionary: For A Deeper Understanding of the Word*. AMG Publishers.

ransomed us by sacrificing Himself. He is the only hero who can both die for His beloved bride and live to protect, defend, and return for her. That gives us plenty of reasons to love Him passionately, exuberantly, and consumingly.

Chapter 5: Falling in Love with Christ

In Christian churches, we spend quite a bit of time discussing how insignificant we are in comparison to God. We guilt each other into repentance by highlighting our failings and sins, and showing how little we deserve God's grace. And it is accurate to say that even at our best, we have nothing to boast about before God (1 Cor. 1:25-31; Jer. 9:23-24). We did not deserve Jesus's sacrifice or He and His Father's attention.

However, we need to be careful that our (correct) acknowledgement that we don't deserve gifts from God does not undermine our understanding of the high value He places on us. God thinks humanity is worth dying for. They place a high value on the people they have redeemed. They want us in their family because they love us.

The Song of Solomon has become one of my favorite sections of the Bible. This book of Hebrew poetry has been variously interpreted as an allegory of God's love for His people, "a drama about Solomon and his bride," a poem using Solomon's name but really about "a pair of rustic lovers," or "a sequence of nuptial songs celebrating the week of wedding festivities."²² I think we can read it on a couple different levels: as a celebration of human love and marriage, and as a picture of God's love for His

²² Freehof, S. B. (1949) The Song of Songs: A General Suggestion. *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 39(4), 397-402. p. 397, 398.

people.

This Song contains some of the most beautiful expressions of love in the entire Bible. The woman, in this allegory representative of the Church, is fully assured of the strength of her lover's devotion. He calls her, "most beautiful among women" and "my beloved" (Song 1:8, 16, WEB). She talks about taking "great delight" in spending time with him (Song 2:3, WEB). She can confidently say, "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine" (Song 6:3, WEB); "I am my beloved's, and he desires me!" (Song 7:10, NET). It's wonderful to be able to say that about your spouse. It's even more awesome to realize Jesus feels that way about His church.

Now that Christ has cleansed the church with His blood, He and the Lover of Song of Solomon can say, "You are altogether beautiful, my darling! There is no blemish in you!" (Song 4:7, NET). He continues, "You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride! You have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes" (Song 4:9, NET). As Matthew Henry wrote in the 18th century,

No expressions of love can be more passionate than these here, in which Christ manifests his affection to his church; and yet that great proof of his love, his dying for it, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, goes far beyond them all. A spouse so dearly bought and paid for could not but be

*dearly loved. Such a price being given for her, a
high value must needs be put upon her
accordingly.*²³

The Lord our God not only loves us, but wants us to belong to Him and be with Him. As a result of this love and the redemptive process, God the Father has adopted us into His family that He might raise and fashion a fitting wife for His Son (Gal. 4:4-5; Rom. 8:15; Eph. 1:5). Just as Adam and Eve were both children of God, so are Christ—the second Adam (1 Cor. 15:45)—and His church children of the same Father. Frequently in the Song of Solomon, the beloved is referred to as “sister,” “spouse,” and “bride.”

I used to think it odd that the bride is called both “sister” and “spouse,” but there are a couple reasons this makes sense, particularly in the allegorical reading. First, Matthew Henry comments, “because no one relation among men is sufficient to set forth Christ's love to his church, and to show that all this must be understood spiritually, he owns her in two relations, which among men are incompatible.”²⁴ There are three ways to join a family—

²³ Henry, M. (1706-1721). Commentary on Song of Solomon 4:8-13, III. 1. In *MySword Bible* (version 13.0). [mobile app]. Riversoft Ministry. <https://www.mysword.info/>

²⁴ Henry, M. (1706-1721). Commentary on Song of Solomon 4:8-13, I. In *MySword Bible* (version 13.0). [mobile app]. Riversoft Ministry. <https://www.mysword.info/>

birth, adoption, and marriage²⁵—and God uses all three at various times throughout scripture to illustrate the way He brings us into His family.

As God's born children, we inherit His nature and spiritual DNA, and we ought to become more and more like Him the longer we live. As His adopted children, we inherit a place in His family group, along with the rights and responsibilities that go along with that. Both those analogies make us Jesus's brothers and sisters. And since the church as a whole is personified as feminine, we can think of ourselves Jesus's adopted sister when we think of ourselves as His affianced bride.

It's amazing that the Father and Jesus want us to be part of this family and are not ashamed to own their relationship to us (Heb. 2:11; 11:16). What an incredible gift it is that Jesus Christ wants to acknowledge our relation to Him! As believers, we can say with the woman in Song of Solomon, "he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend" (Song 5:16, WEB).

More Love

In English, we only have one word for love. In the Greek language, there are four words that express feelings and concepts

²⁵ Richards, E. R, and James, R. (2020). "Chapter 1. Kinship: Being in a Family." In *Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes: Patronage, Honor, and Shame in the Biblical World*. InterVarsity Press.

English lumps together into “love.” Those Greek words are *eros* (erotic love), *storge* (family love), *philos* (friendship/kinship love), and *agape* (benevolent/unconditional love).²⁶ Only forms of *agape* and *philos* appear in the New Testament. *Agape* is commonly defined as the highest form of love, and we will examine it more closely in a later chapter. For now, I want to focus on *philos* and related words like *phileo*.

Philos is often translated as “friend” or “friends.” It means “loved, dear, befriended ... with the meaning of companion.”²⁷ It is used in the regular sense of people having friends, but also of a relationship between God and select individuals. In James 2:23, Abraham is called “the friend of God” (WEB). Christ applies this word to His disciples, calling them “my friends” in Luke 12:4 (WEB). In the following passage, the word “love” comes from *agape* and *agapeo*, but “friends” is *philos*.

“My commandment is this—to love one another just as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this—that one lays down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.”

John 15:12-13, NET

²⁶ Myers, Sharron (n.d.). “Greek Names for Love.” *Greek Index*. https://www.greeceindex.com/general/greek_love_words/

²⁷ Zodhiates, S. (1992). “5384. φίλος.” In *The Complete Wordstudy Dictionary: For A Deeper Understanding of the Word*. AMG Publishers.

It's an amazing thing to be called God's friends. While *agape* is the word most often used for "love" in the Bible, *philos* should not be taken lightly.²⁸ There is no easy distinction between the usage of *agape* and *philos*. Both are used of man's love towards God, God's love towards man, and inappropriate attachment to earthly things. Zodhiates writes that, in general, *agape* involves perceiving the needs of the one being loved and meeting that need, "not according to the object's concept of need, but that of the one who loves."²⁹ *Philos* implies having common interests and a friendship with the object of one's love.

While *agape* can be called a higher kind of love, I think there is something amazing in recognizing that it is not the only love God shows us. Before His crucifixion, Jesus told His disciples "the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God" (John 16:27, NET). The Father has *phileo* for those who have *phileo* for His son. This means the Father Himself has common interests and friendship with those who love and believe in His Son. In this context, it is certainly not a lesser love than *agape*. *Philos* is an incredible kind of love to share with the creator of the universe! This love also

²⁸ A search comparing the frequency of *philos* (G5384) and *phileo* (G5368) with *agape* (G26) and *agapao* (G25) shows 48 verses using *philos/phileo* and 206 verses using *agape/agapao*. Search performed using e-Sword version 12.2.0, copyright Rick Meyers.

²⁹ Zodhiates, S. (1992). "5368. φιλέω." In *The Complete Wordstudy Dictionary: For A Deeper Understanding of the Word*. AMG Publishers.

comes with certain obligations; it's a reciprocal friendship.

All those I love, I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent! Listen! I am standing at the door and knocking! If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come into his home and share a meal with him, and he with me. I will grant the one who conquers permission to sit with me on my throne, just as I too conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.

Revelation 3:19-21, NET

Just like people who want to be friends with you should respect your boundaries and treat you well, so Jesus expects His friends to keep His commandments and treat Him with respect. When we respond to Jesus's *philos* love, then we'll have the sort of close friendship with Him implied by sharing a meal together in our home. *Philos* is a love that most of us can identify with (perhaps more readily than unconditional, benevolent *agape*) because it's the kind of love we naturally feel for our closest friends. That is how we should feel towards our Savior.

Once we realize even a small part of what He has done for us, it should be impossible not to have a strong attachment to Him and want to do the things He asks of us. If someone professing to know and follow Jesus does not love Him in this way, then there's

something wrong. In his closing comments in a letter to the Corinthian church, Paul wrote, “If any man doesn’t love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be cursed” (1 Cor. 16:22, WEB). This is a strong condemnation for those who do not show *phileo* for the Lord. “Cursed” is translated from a Greek phrase consisting of three words: *anathema maran atha*. The word “anathema” means “excommunicated ... accursed,” and “maran atha” is “an exclamation of approaching divine judgment.”³⁰ If we do not love Jesus with the sort of affection we feel for our closest friends, we are in danger of being divinely judged as accursed. It might seem a harsh statement, but without this type of love we don’t have a real relationship.³¹

³⁰Strong, J. (2011). “331 *anathema*” and “3134 *maran atha*.” In *The Strongest Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. Zondervan.

³¹ It’s also worth noting that if you’re worried about whether you love Jesus enough, chances are you probably do have *philos* for Him. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t care what He thinks. See Heb. 6:4-10 for a similar pattern of dire warning followed by encouragement not to worry too much.

Chapter 6: Making Ready to Marry

We touched on this in Chapter 4, but I want to take some time to reexamine the Old Covenant (also called the Sinai or Mosaic covenant). The New Testament, particularly the book of Hebrews, establishes that the Old Covenant prefigured a “better covenant” mediated by Jesus Christ (Heb. 8:6, WEB). Both covenants included the idea of a marriage agreement, and in the Old Testament this agreement is briefly outlined in Exodus 19. When the Lord God spoke to Moses before giving the Ten Commandments, He reminded the children of Israel that God had delivered them from Egypt and brought them to Himself (Ex. 19:4). As a result, He says,

*“Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice
and keep my covenant, then you shall be my own
possession from among all peoples; for all the earth
is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests
and a holy nation.”*

Exodus 19:5-6, WEB

A covenant (in this context) “is a divine order or agreement which is established without any human cooperation and springing from the choice of God Himself whose will and determination

account for both its origin and its character.”³² In other words, God is the one who initiates relationships with human beings, and He has the right to decide on the “character” of the covenant relationship. Under both Old and New Covenants, obedience to God's commandments and faithfulness to Him (in response to His faithfulness to us) are expected of those in a relationship with God. If we've entered covenant with God, then we “are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people ... the people of God ” (1 Pet. 2:9-10, NKJV). We belong to Him and we're duty-bound to honor Him as our only Lord.

As is fitting in a covenant, including marriage arrangements, God laid out the terms of the agreement before the people agreed to it. In the case of ancient Israel at Sinai, “All the people answered together, and said, ‘All that Yahweh has spoken we will do’” (Ex. 19:8, WEB). “Thus they strike the bargain,” as Matthew Henry says, “accepting the Lord to be to them a God, and giving up themselves to be to him a people.”³³ In other words, when asked if they would take the Lord as their husband, the people said “I do.” They bound themselves and all their descendants to faithfully follow Yahweh as their Lord and God.

³² Zodhiates, S. (1992). “1242. διαθήκη. Section IV.” In *The Complete Wordstudy Dictionary: For A Deeper Understanding of the Word*. AMG Publishers.

³³ Henry, M. (1706-1721). Commentary on Exodus 19:1-8, III. 2. In *MySword Bible* (version 13.0). [mobile app]. Riversoft Ministry.

When this Old Covenant was enacted, the people did not simply show up one day, walk up the mountain, and receive the Ten Commandments. There was preparation involved, particularly a sanctification process. Before they could meet with God and hear the words of the covenant, the people had to make themselves ready. They washed their clothing and went through a two-day sanctification process so they would be ready to meet with God on the third day (Ex. 19:10-15).

As discussed in Chapter 4, there are parallels between human marriage and God's plan for enlarging His family. One of those parallels involves the bride getting ready for her marriage. The instructions given in Exodus concerning Israel's sanctification have parallels with the Jewish tradition where the bride readied herself for the marriage while the groom prepared a home for them to share. The church's process of sanctification (i.e. becoming holy as her future husband is holy) and readying herself is mentioned frequently throughout the Bible. Revelation reveals that at the end, when “the wedding celebration of the Lamb” is announced, there will be great joy that “his bride has made herself ready” (Rev. 19:7, NET). The church is supposed to be ready by the time Jesus returns to this earth.

The Bible contains specific instructions for how to live our lives as we make ourselves ready to marry Jesus Christ, including the type of character God wants to shape in His people. Not

surprisingly, parallels for many of these instructions can be found in the wording of traditional Christian wedding vows.

Obedience

Obedience is not a popular concept today. Particularly in the western world, there is a sense that obedience to anything or anyone infringes upon our fundamental right of freedom. For centuries, Christian wedding vows included the bride promising “to love, honor, and obey” her husband, as found in the *Booke of Common Prayer*. Antipathy towards the word “obey” reached the point that in 1922, the Episcopal Church voted to remove the word.³⁴

In the years since, this trend has not reversed, but still invites comment. One of the headlines for the royal wedding between Kate Middleton and Prince William concerned the exclusion of obey. The article noted that she was “following in the footsteps of his mother in departing from the ancient church formulations of the wedding service. Unlike earlier generations, few brides today would use the term, and the word does not appear in the wedding service.”³⁵ Even in my recent wedding, where we

³⁴ All Heart Weddings. (n.d.). “The History of Wedding Vows.” <https://allheartweddings.com/the-history-of-wedding-vows/>

³⁵ Bates, S. (2011, April 28). “Kate Middleton will not promise to 'obey' in royal wedding service.” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/apr/28/kate-middleton-obey-royal-wedding>

wanted to use traditional vows, the wording for our church's service had me promise to "submit to him as God has ordained" rather than "obey" (which was perfectly fine with us since "submit" is Biblical wording).

Unlike brides in this world, the church gets no option to remove obedience from their agreement with Christ. He said, "If you love me, you will obey my commandments" (John 14:15, NET). Of course, this implies the reverse as well: if we're not obeying Him, then we're showing that we don't love Him. The idea of loving God and keeping His commandments is paired at least eleven times in the Old Testament³⁶ and eight times in the New Testament.³⁷ Keeping His commandments is vital to having a relationship with Him, and so learning to obey God is a first step in making ourselves ready to marry Jesus and be a helper comparable to Him.

Purity and Faithfulness

When we are called "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people" (1 Pet. 2:9, NKJV), the word "holy" is translated from the same Greek word used to refer to us as "saints" throughout the New Testament. This

³⁶ See Ex. 20:6; Deut. 5:10; 7:9; 11:1, 13; 22; 19:9; 30:16; Josh. 22:5; Neh. 1:5; Dan. 9:4.

³⁷ See Matt. 22:37-40; Mark 12:30-31; John 14:15, 21; 15:10; 1 John 4:21; 5:2-3; 2 John 1:6.

word is *hagios*, and it means “sanctified ... ceremonially or morally clean ... consecrated, devoted, sacred, holy, meaning set apart from a common to a sacred use.”³⁸ As we have already seen in Ephesians 5:26, the bride/church being clean has to do with Christ's sacrifice. He gave Himself to save us from sin and set us apart as a people who belong to Him. Commitment to purity on both a physical and spiritual level is an essential part of our sanctification.

Remember, Jesus paid to redeem us with the price of His own life. In his first letter to the Corinthian church, Paul appears shocked that anyone could forget this and ignore their resulting obligation to faithfulness and purity. That church had an issue with being too lenient about sexual immorality, so that's the example Paul used when making a point about obedience to God's law and faithfulness to Christ (1 Cor. 5-6). “You are not your own,” he reminds his readers, “For you were bought at a price. Therefore glorify God with your body” (1 Cor. 6:19-20, NET). Because we belong to God and Christ, we have an obligation to honor Them in every aspect of our lives. We were supposed to learn from ancient Israel's mistakes and avoid imitating their example as an unfaithful wife (1 Cor. 10:1-14). The issue of faithfulness continued to be a central concern for Paul.

³⁸ Zodhiates, S. (1992). “40. ἅγιος,” In *The Complete Wordstudy Dictionary: For A Deeper Understanding of the Word*. AMG Publishers.

*For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy,
because I promised you in marriage to one
husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.
But I am afraid that just as the serpent deceived Eve
by his treachery, your minds may be led astray from
a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.*

2 Corinthians 11:2-3, NET

Closely related to obedience, faithfulness involves an active commitment to live by Christ's words and align everything we do on a moral, spiritual, and physical level with our commitment to Him. We know we are God's children and we live in hope of eternal life with Him; that knowledge should result in faithful action. John said, "everyone who has this hope focused on him purifies himself, just as Jesus is pure" (1 John 3:3, NET). We're supposed to respond to God's involvement in our lives by doing things that make us more and more like Him.

For Better, For Worse

When I was counseling for baptism, the first place the minister directed me was the "count the cost" passages in Luke:

*"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own
father and mother, and wife and children, and
brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he*

cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, wanting to build a tower, doesn't sit down first and compute the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish the tower, all who see it will begin to make fun of him. They will say, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish!' ... In the same way therefore not one of you can be my disciple if he does not renounce all his own possessions."

Luke 14:26-30, 33, NET

A commitment to follow Jesus Christ must not be taken lightly. There was a reason Paul went around the churches “exhorting them to continue in the faith, and [saying] through many afflictions we must enter into God’s Kingdom” (Acts 14:22, WEB). It is not easy to follow Christ, and He wants us to understand what a high level of commitment is required. Jesus and the Father are all-in on this project of bringing human beings into the family of God, and He expects us to be committed as well. We must keep growing and stay faithful.

For it is impossible in the case of those who have once been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, become partakers of the Holy Spirit, tasted the good

*word of God and the miracles of the coming age,
and then have committed apostasy, to renew them
again to repentance, since they are crucifying the
Son of God for themselves all over again and
holding him up to contempt. ...*

*But in your case, dear friends, even though we
speak like this, we are convinced of better things
relating to salvation. For God is not unjust so as to
forget your work and the love you have
demonstrated for his name, in having served and
continuing to serve the saints. But we passionately
want each of you to demonstrate the same
eagerness for the fulfillment of your hope until the
end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators
of those who through faith and perseverance inherit
the promises.*

Hebrews 6:4-6, 9-12 NET

Passages like this were not written to discourage us, but to ensure that we don't take lightly our commitment to follow Jesus "for better or for worse." While Christians are making ready for eternity in God's family, there will be times that seem hard or discouraging. In the end, though, the "better" will certainly outweigh the "worse."

Paul suffered many things for His commitment to Jesus

including beatings, stoning, shipwreck, and prison (2 Cor. 11:22-28). Yet he said, “I consider that our present sufferings cannot even be compared to the coming glory that will be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18, NET). He also said he “suffered the loss of all things” for Christ, but regards any assets lost “as dung” in comparison “to the far greater value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil. 3:8, NET). Most of us have not suffered nearly as much loss, persecution, and danger as Paul. We need to get to the point that even if we did, we’d stay faithfully committed to God.

You Don’t Have to Do It Alone

Obedience, purity, faithfulness, commitment no matter what—that sounds like a lot to take on ourselves. Thankfully, we are assured in scripture that God knows we can’t make ourselves perfect all on our own. He doesn’t expect us to. When Jesus Christ was in His human body on the earth, He said “I can of Myself do nothing” (John 5:30, NKJV). If the only human being who has never sinned—God in the flesh—said He could do nothing apart from the Father (John 5:19), then surely the same applies to us.

At His last Passover, Jesus Christ told the disciples, “I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me—and I in him—bears much fruit, because apart from me you can accomplish nothing” (John 15:5, NET). At first, this appears to contradict the idea that the Bride can (and should) make herself

ready. But just because we can't do anything *apart from* Jesus doesn't mean there isn't something for us to do *with* Jesus. A verse in Philippians helps to clarify.

In this letter, Paul instructs his readers to “continue working out your salvation with awe and reverence, for the one bringing forth in you both the desire and the effort—for the sake of his good pleasure—is God” (Phil. 2:12-13, NET). These two verses pair our responsibility to prepare ourselves with a promise that God will also work in us. We must be working towards our own salvation, but it is impossible for a human being to earn salvation on their own (Gal. 2:16). That is why we must abide in Christ. We can do nothing apart from Him, just as He could do nothing apart from His Father.

If we live in Jesus Christ and develop a close relationship with Him and Our Father, we will be making ourselves ready. It is impossible that a genuine love for Them will not be paired with a desire to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18, NET). If we continue in Him, we will succeed, for “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31, NET).

Chapter 7: Unending Love

As promised, we're now going to talk about the most-often used word in the New Testament that's translated "love." Unlike many other Greek words, where we need to go to a dictionary for a translation, we have an explanation for *agape* right in the Bible.

Love is patient, love is kind, it is not envious. Love does not brag, it is not puffed up. It is not rude, it is not self-serving, it is not easily angered or resentful.

It is not glad about injustice, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

1 Corinthians 13:4-8, NET

This kind of love is not the world's concept of a feel-good, fleeting emotion that someone "falls into." Forms of the word "love" appear over 300 times in the New Testament and more than 200 of those are translated from *agape* or a related word.³⁹ Clearly, *agape* is a vitally important concept in the Bible.

Agapao (the root of *agape*) indicates "a direction of the will and finding one's joy in something or someone," as well as having

³⁹ These numbers are according to a word search of NET, WEB, and KJV+Strong's numbers translations performed using e-Sword version 12.2.0, copyright Rick Meyers.

a moral component, “i.e. love that expresses compassion.”⁴⁰ The closely related *agape*, means “love, affectionate regard, goodwill, benevolence. With reference to God's love, it ... involves God doing what He knows is best for man and not necessarily what man desires.”⁴¹ This is the kind of love of which God is the author and source. It involves an active interest in the well-being of the one loved. This is the type of love that God has for everyone; it's the word used in the famous verse, “God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16, WEB).

God has so much *agape* for everyone that He sent His son to die so all humanity would have the opportunity at eternal life with Him. The eternal life isn't applied automatically—we still have to respond to God's call and accept the relationship He offers—but God strongly desires that everyone would be saved (Ezek. 18:23; 1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9). His love is deeply connected with His mercy and justice. It's a core part of his character, so much so that John says, “God is love.”

*The person who does not love does not know God,
because God is love. By this the love of God is*

⁴⁰ Zodhiates, S. (1992). “25. ἀγαπάω.” In *The Complete Wordstudy Dictionary: For A Deeper Understanding of the Word*. AMG Publishers.

⁴¹ Zodhiates, S. (1992). “26. ἀγάπη.” In *The Complete Wordstudy Dictionary: For A Deeper Understanding of the Word*. AMG Publishers.

revealed in us: that God has sent his one and only Son into the world so that we may live through him. In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, if God so loved us, then we also ought to love one another. ...

If anyone confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God resides in him and he in God. And we have come to know and to believe the love that God has in us. God is love, and the one who resides in love resides in God, and God resides in him.

1 John 4:8-11, 15-16, NET

This is a beautiful passage, but also a sobering one. We have so much proof of God's love for us, yet at the same time we're warned that if we do not love other people with the same kind of love God has shown to us, then we cannot claim to love God. Without *agape*, our Christianity is a lie. This does not mean we have to have warm fuzzy feelings towards everyone, but it does mean we must have an outgoing interest in their wellbeing. For example, we are not commanded to have friendly, brotherly love towards our enemies, but we are commanded to have *agape* towards them.⁴² Just as we are duty-bound to show mercy as

⁴² "Love your enemies" in Matt. 5:44 and Luke 6:27, 35 is translated from

recipients of God's mercy (Matt. 18:23-35), so are we obligated to love because He loves us.

The importance of this kind of love is reinforced by Christ's words to His disciples on the night of His betrayal. "I give you a new commandment," He said, "Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. Everyone will know by this that you are my disciples—if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35 NET). This love is vitally important because people are supposed to recognize us as Christ's disciples from our *agape*. If we are striving to emulate the character of God and Christ, we need to develop their love in us. Paul reinforced this before defining *agape* in his letter to the Corinthian church.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but I do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so that I can remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I own, and if I give over my body in order to boast, but do not have love, I receive no benefit.

1 Corinthians 13:1-3, NET

Prophesy, understanding, knowledge, faith, generosity, and self-sacrifice are important, yet without love they would be meaningless. *Agape* is even greater than faith and hope (1 Cor. 13:13). Love is absolutely necessary for all who would walk in the footsteps of Christ.

Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not covet," (and if there is any other commandment) are summed up in this, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

Romans 13:8-10, NET

Agape is the single most important trait that we need to have as Christians. If we could love perfectly, then we would fulfill God's law. This kind of love and all that it contains is at the heart of the character that God wants to see in us. God is love and to become like God, we need to become love as well. This love should be displayed so powerfully in our lives that when people look at us, they can readily see that we are Jesus Christ's disciples.

Conclusion

The Bible is the story of perfect love. The God-family brought us into existence because they wanted more family members, even knowing that the Word would have to give up His life to save us from our sin. Though they share the closest, most perfect relationship in the entire universe, the Father was willing to give up His Son and the Son was willing to lay down His life so we could be part of their relationship.

From the moment of creation, the Father and Son have never stopped acting out of love. They loved in the garden, even when man fell. They loved when making covenants with people, including the marriage covenant with ancient Israel. Even when Israel was unfaithful, God never ceased to love. And when Jesus Christ came to establish the New Covenant and allowed Himself to be tortured to death, He proved forever the depth of love He has for His bride.

The gift of eternal life is an offer of complete and perfect love shared in a relationship with God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. If we accept the offer of marriage to the Son and let Him cleanse us with His own blood, we can be part of the greatest love story ever told.

A note from the author

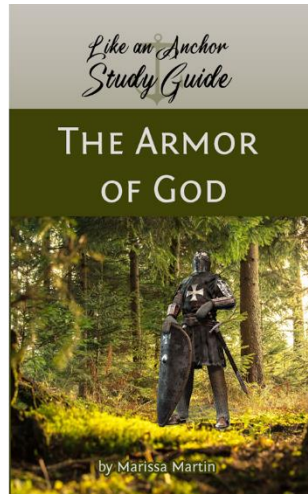
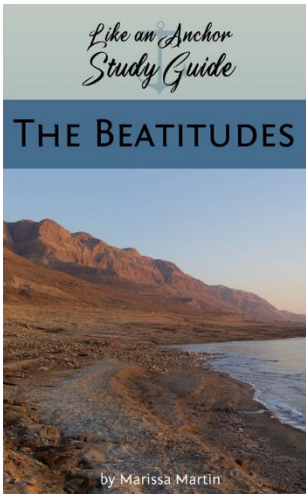
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