



**Thus says the Lord: I remember the devotion of your youth,
your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness,
in a land not sown. JER 2:2**

God's Spousal Love

Because spousal love is the most intimate and sacrificial love known to human beings in the natural world, the biblical authors fill the pages of the Bible with its narrative and emotional power. Countless stories of human love, engagement and marriage, anticipation and passion, pregnancy and birth, and infidelity and divorce fill the biblical literature. In fact, all of the Bible's sacred history can be described as an unending love story, as the inspired writers use the images and vocabulary of marital love to express the love between God and God's people.

The first chapters and the final chapters of the Bible—from Genesis to Revelation—form the bookends of the Bible, both of which offer images of spousal love. The first verses of Genesis begin with the expression of God's love through the act of creation, coming to its summit in the making of man and woman, the fullest image of God in the world. The narrative in the garden expresses the origins of spousal love through the story of woman being made from the side of the man. When she is presented to the man, he exclaims with joy that she is “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” This longing of spouses for one another becomes a symbol of God's desire for the intimacy of an everlasting marital covenant with humankind.

The Bible's closing scenes culminate in images of a great wedding, the marriage banquet of the Lord. The bride of Christ is presented as adorned for her

husband. The longing of the glorified church for her risen Lord is expressed in the heartfelt cry, "Come, Lord Jesus!" The scenes anticipate the climax of the divine love story, the eternal unity of Christ and worshipping humanity. This is the joyful eternity anticipated and experienced sacramentally in the eucharistic liturgy of the church.

In between these opening and closing texts of the Bible we find countless expressions of divine spousal love. From the Torah, prophets, psalms, and wisdom writings of Israel to the gospels, letters, and apocalyptic literature of the church, the Scriptures present us with beautiful images of the Creator's love for humanity, the Lord's love for Israel, and Christ's love for his church. God and his people are bound by ties of the heart, and they mutually long for the eternal fulfillment of their deepest longings.

Reflection and discussion

- In what sense is spousal love the richest expression of human love?
- What other types of human relationships can image God's love for humanity?

Israel's Love Story with God

The heart-stirring narrative running throughout the Bible is tied together for us when we understand God's ultimate passion. Our God is an ageless lover who desires nothing more than to unite humanity with himself in a spousal covenant.

This divine desire begins to be expressed as God forms a bond of "stead-

fast love and faithfulness” with the Israelites. This covenant that God desires is so committed, so personal, so self-giving and life-giving that it can only be described in human language as a courtship, betrothal, and marriage. God enters this spousal covenant first with Israel, so that they might be an example to the surrounding nations of what it means to share in a committed covenant with God.

Israel’s prophets communicate God’s steadfast love as well as Israel’s infidelity to the covenant through the language of spousal love. God is the husband who passionately loves his wife and who suffers deeply when his love is scorned. Israel is not grateful for the gifts that her divine husband has lavished upon her, so God takes them back and chastises her. But God’s purpose is only to bring about repentance, reconciliation, and a renewed union.

During the time of Israel’s exile, the prophets looked back to the exodus as the time when Israel followed God with bridal devotion and to Mount Sinai as the place where the marriage covenant was formed with Israel. Following Israel’s adulterous behavior of following other gods and breaking the covenant, her divine husband does not repudiate her, but calls her to return to him. He promises to entice Israel back to the wilderness and then, in the days to come, to establish a new and everlasting covenant with her. The unfaithful wife will be welcomed back and the joys of love renewed forever.

The Song of Songs, a lyrical masterpiece about the joys of human love, was reinterpreted in Israel based on the prophetic words of spousal love. The Song came to express God’s passionate love for Israel and the divine nuptial. It conveys all the freshness and joy of the couple in the garden of Eden. Paradise lost will become paradise regained and perfected without end.

As the prophets anticipate the future messianic age, they join the spousal imagery with the familiar biblical stories of the sterile wife who bore children through God’s intervention. Jerusalem, who has become barren through conquest and exile, will have more children than she can hold. The once-abandoned city now includes the nations of the world in God’s family. Far exceeding any previous expectations, God’s people will include the whole of redeemed humanity.

God’s spousal love always elicits hope for a continually better future. With undying love, God invites his people to receive a new heart, a new spirit, and a new covenant so that they can share a full-hearted bond with God and be-

come the new creation God desires for humanity. God's steadfast love and faithfulness is without end.

Reflection and discussion

- What qualities of God's love are emphasized by the spousal imagery of the Old Testament?
- How does imagining the covenant as God's courtship, betrothal, and marriage enhance my understanding of the Bible?

The Wedding Feast of God's Kingdom Arrives

In the gospels, Jesus describes his ministry as a joyful wedding festival with himself as the bridegroom. When he is asked why his disciples do not fast, he replies that the wedding guests cannot mourn while the bridegroom is with them. Jesus uses the imagery again as he compares God's kingdom to a marriage banquet that a king makes for the marriage of his son. In this parable, Jesus again presents himself as the bridegroom and the kingdom as a wedding feast.

In John's gospel, John the Baptist is presented as the best man of the wedding, the friend of the bridegroom. The best man in the Jewish wedding pre-

pare the wedding and conducts the bridegroom to the bride. According to the Jewish rabbis, Moses had this role in the spousal union of God and Israel. In the period of the church, Paul claims the role of the best man. He tells his Corinthian community, “I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.” As the best man, Paul has the responsibility of preparing the bride and presenting her to the bridegroom.

Paul’s most essential development of the marriage symbolism is found in his letter to the Ephesians. He urges spouses toward the kind of love by which Christ loves the church.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. (Eph 5:25–27)

Christ’s love is selfless and self-sacrificial. The ritual bath, made on the morning of the Jewish wedding, prepares the bride before she is clothed in bridal garments. Christ himself prepares the church because the bridegroom wishes to carry in his arms a beautiful bride. She is transformed by God’s word and clothed in splendid garments, without wrinkle or stain. Paul brings together the principal matrimonial themes of Scripture: the gifts of the husband, the anticipation of the wedding, the beauty of the bride and her garments, and the mutual love of the spouses.

Paul describes Christ’s love for the church as “a great mystery” to which Christian marriage must look as its model (Eph 5:32). Spousal love is an outward sign of the invisible mystery of Christ’s love for his bride and his bride’s love for him. This great mystery rules out any kind of domination or chauvinism in marriage. Rather, it points spouses in the direction of the cross. The grace of Christian marriage is a fruit of Christ’s cross. He laid down his life for his church in order to save her and to be united with her. In return, she gives herself back to him as a spouse in response to his love.

For this reason and with this grace, spouses willingly share the sufferings of life out of love, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, for

richer or for poorer, for as long as they both shall live. And in the joy of their love and family life, spouses in this life experience a foretaste of the eternal wedding feast of God's kingdom.

Reflection and discussion

- In what sense is the ministry of Jesus a joyful wedding festival?

- How do the spousal images of the New Testament enhance my understanding of Jesus and his church?

Spousal Love Reflects the Love of God into the World

The spousal language that permeates the Bible assures us that we are God's beloved. We are the spouse who calls to Christ, "Come, Lord Jesus," to make our life complete. We are not servants or slaves; we are beloved. We do not serve him out of a sense of fear, duty, or guilt. What spouse wishes to be loved by one who is motivated by intimidation or obligation? We are beloved.

We can take the matrimonial language of Scripture and apply it to our own individual relationship with God. We can recognize our own experiences in those of Israel: in her marriage covenant, then as unfaithful, punished, repentant, purified, pardoned, and called again to union with the bridegroom. We can see ourselves with Christ in the position of the bride, loved though undeserving, redeemed, and called to happiness in mutual love.

Christianity's mystical tradition has applied these matrimonial images from the Bible to the quest for loving union between God and the individual soul. The mysticism of love and union is a mutual and reciprocal attraction between the human person and God. We have a profound need for God, and we experience a lack of fulfillment until that union is achieved. As St. Augustine wrote, "We are made for you, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

The path toward union with God is described by the mystics as a process that continually moves a person to a pure love for God. The way of purification, the way of illumination, and the way of union are necessary elements of that path. St. John of the Cross and St. Theresa of Ávila distinguish between two levels—spiritual betrothal and spiritual marriage—separated by a period of waiting and preparation for full union with God.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux describes this preparation as a process moving through a series of stages: first, from a cringing fear of God, such as that of slaves who obey the master out of fear of punishment; second, to hopeful obedience to God out of expectation of a reward, such as that of a hired servant; third, to the disciplined obedience of a student to a teacher; fourth, to the respectful obedience of a child who knows he is an heir; and finally to the full loving devotion of a bride to her bridegroom (*Sermons on the Song of Songs*, 7).

St. Bernard describes this movement toward union with God as refinement of the human reason by the Word and the refinement of the human will by the Holy Spirit. The Father then joins human reason and will into a perfect soul and "unites it to himself as his glorious bride," from whom the humility of reason has removed all wrinkles and charity of the will has left no stain (*The Twelve Degrees of Humility and of Pride*, 7). "All her being, all her hope, is love and love alone. The bride overflows with love, and therewith the bridegroom is content. He seeks nothing else from her; she has nothing else to give. It is this which makes him the bridegroom and her the bride" (*Sermons on the Song of Songs*, 83).

While this application of mystical and matrimonial symbolism to individual lives can be profitable for spiritual growth, it often fails to express the full richness of the biblical images. Rather, the married couple, living out their mutual love for one another in all its fullness, expresses for us, most clearly and completely, the love between Christ and his church. The love within Christian marriage is a living icon of Christ's spousal love for us. The biblical

symbol must maintain its concreteness in the visible world of human love and marriage to maintain its transforming power.

Just as our understanding of baptismal symbolism is diminished if we lose touch with the life-giving effects of flowing water, and eucharistic symbolism is diminished if we lose touch with the bonding effects of family meals, the Bible's matrimonial symbolism loses its richness if it is detached from the context of human commitment and marriage. A biblical or sacramental symbol reveals and makes present what it symbolizes. The symbol or icon of a life-giving marriage evokes God's faithful love for his people and invites our joyful response.

God reveals the qualities of his love for us in and through the experience of spousal love, that exclusive love of spouses for one another with all of its passionate power. This is a love that desires intimacy and union with the other, a love that leads to the highest degree of self-commitment to the other. This love sets aside selfish desires and plants the interests of the other in the center of one's being. Any attempt to claim that this relationship is transitory is rejected as intolerable, and mutual fidelity becomes an imperative. Sacrifice and self-giving for the other are experienced not as an obligation but as a joyful means to express one's love and to deepen that love for the other.

The implications for the church in calling herself the bride of Christ are as numerous as in married life for spouses. From its harsh challenges to its ecstatic joys, matrimonial love expresses in a fresh and exhilarating way the reality of Christ's church. The love of Christ desires this total union, reciprocal and definitive, with his church. The church belongs to Christ, who gave himself completely for her. She has a unique and exclusive relationship with her bridegroom. She was chosen by Christ, and she has accepted that choice. She is clothed in garments that express to the world her relationship with Christ. She has been given gifts to which she must respond, and she longs for the day when her joy will be complete. Christ's bride, the church, lives in hope for that day in which her life and love will be so glorified as to share in perfect mutuality that love with which she is even now loved.

Reflection and discussion

- In what sense is Christian marriage an icon of Christ's spousal love for us?

- How might a study of God's spousal love enhance my understanding of Christian marriage?

Prayer

God of faithful love, who has made Christian marriage as a living icon of your love for us and established the new covenant as the spousal bond of your Son with his church, shower me with your grace as I begin this study of your Scriptures. Let your holy word transform my mind and my heart so that I may respond more fully to the marriage festival of your kingdom. Send your Holy Spirit upon me to guide, encourage, and enlighten me as I contemplate your inspired word.