

Take Up Your First Calling

Our understanding of the kingdom of God takes a dramatic turn when we realize our first calling is to love and enjoy Jesus.

What would God preach to the human race if He knew He had only one more sermon? We can find the answer simply by turning in our Bibles to Matthew 21 and 22. Here the Holy Spirit records Jesus' last public sermon—a message filled with mystery, surprise and profound significance for the church today.

“The kingdom of heaven,” Jesus said, **“is like a certain king who arranged a marriage for his son”** (Matt. 22:2).

These words exploded from the Lord's heart only days before He went to the cross. Up to that time, He had compared the kingdom of God to many things in His parables and teachings. Now He presented one final paradigm: the kingdom of God as a wedding feast.

Why did He save this theme until last? I believe Jesus was enticing His people with a dynamic new emphasis on **divine romance**, knowing it would excite the human heart as nothing else would. He wanted to stir up a hot desire in each of us for extravagant **“bridegroom love,”** with Jesus Himself as the **Bridegroom**, and we, **His people, His church**, the cherished bride.

The prophet Hosea, in approximately 750 B.C., saw this paradigm coming. Speaking prophetically about how the redeemed would view the Messiah in the generation of the Lord's return, he wrote: **“‘And it shall be, in that day,’ says the Lord, ‘that you will call Me “my Husband”’** (Hos. 2:16).

Similarly, the apostle Paul wrote, **“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her. ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’**

This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:25, 31-32). The Holy Spirit then closed the written Word with this same bridal theme: “And the Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’” (Rev. 22:17).

Our Spiritual Identity

Over the years, other **kingdom** comparisons have captured the church’s attention, revealing a corresponding truth about our spiritual identity: We are the family of God, the army of God, the body of Christ, a royal priesthood. But I believe the bridal paradigm is coming to the forefront at this time in church history because of its unique impact on the human heart. Before the **Second Coming of Christ**, the Holy Spirit will emphasize a revelation of the Messiah as our Bridegroom God, and our spiritual identity will be transformed into one of a cherished, lovesick bride.

The emotional implications are vast. Not only will the first commandment—“You shall **love the Lord** your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37)—be restored to its primary role in the church, but many of the ways we operate within our own hearts and with each other will change as we see Jesus as our heavenly Bridegroom.

For one, our efforts to fulfill the Great Commission will be less bruising. The reality is that when we work hard for God without being tenderized by the love of God, we often end up bruised, broken and burned out. We were never meant to function best as workers for God; rather, God designed us in His image to be lovers of God!

When we seek first to be extravagant lovers of Jesus, a dynamic of the Spirit is released in our inner man. We carry its reward in us: a lovesick heart fascinated with the beauty of Christ Jesus. In fact, our primary reward in this life is this ability to feel God’s love—to be tenderized by His love for us and then to be exhilarated with love back to Him.

Only as lovesick worshipers are we able to maintain an overflowing heart toward God even in difficult circumstances. Sacrifices of obedience that were once a burden take on a new sweetness. People may treat us wrongly, and life may get tough. But if we have a fascinated, lovesick heart, our natural circumstances won't dominate our lives.

Sadly, many of us in the church today seek God for other things: more anointing for ministry, economic prosperity, favor with people. These are certainly blessings from God, but they were always designed to be secondary. When they become primary, our spiritual life is weakened. As the Holy Spirit reveals the bridal paradigm in the last days, I'm convinced the primary reward of the kingdom—the ability to experience God's love and love Him back—will come increasingly to the forefront in the hearts and minds of believers.

An Impartation of Love

Of course, it takes God to love God. But God the Father is pleased to impart His love into the heart of the redeemed. In His final high priestly prayer, Jesus said, in essence, "Father, put the same love with which You love Me, in them!" (see John 17:26). I believe the Father must have answered Him, "Son, You can be sure that I will impart to them the same fiery love I have for You. It will be done."

Amazingly, we are the designated beneficiaries of that prayer! God wants to give each of us an impartation of His divine love. He wants to induct us into the "fellowship of the burning heart."

The three Persons of the Trinity have burning hearts of love for one another. It is almost beyond comprehension that God beckons each of us—along with the redeemed throughout human history—into this fellowship.

The experience of holy affection brings us to the highest,

most exhilarating heights known in the created order. Oh, the glory of possessing fiery affections!

The capacity to feel deeply and love passionately is truly one of the great expressions of being created in God's image. Of course, this capacity can be dangerous and destructive if not stewarded properly. But the capacity to burn with deep desire in the heart is what separates us from the rest of creation.

God wants His people, by His grace, to emerge as voluntary lovers of God. The bride of Christ is the crowning glory of His creation—far below the transcendent God in glory, yet exalted beyond the angelic host in intimacy with Jesus. And though our bridal position is the highest in all created order, it is never to be confused with being equal to God. Cult groups blur this vital distinction.

The Father has ordained that His Son have an eternal partner who is equally yoked to Him in love. This is possible only because it is God's own love that is given to us for Jesus.

Lovers, Not Workers

Grasping our identity—that of voluntary lovers who will live forever cherished by Jesus as His bride—will change our whole approach to ministry and service. We will no longer see ourselves merely as God's messengers or as servants fulfilling an important task. Rather, out of a lovesick heart, we will find ourselves empowered by love to do the work of the kingdom.

This will be the characteristic of the martyrs at the end of the age: Lost in love, they won't care what they are called to do; they'll just want to do it with Him! They will want to love and obey Him whether in this age or in the age to come, whether in heaven or on earth. Their hearts will be reaching for that primary reward: to live overflowing in the experience of the love of God—to experience love from Him, to love back and to love others with the overflow.

This is the key to unity in the church, and it will be the key to bringing in the great harvest. Ultimately, the Great Commission will be fulfilled by people lovesick for God and thus overflowing with compassion for other people.

Lovers are always more effective than mere workers. Workers have limits to which they will go for the one they serve; lovers don't. My brother broke his neck at a high school football game 25 years ago. He's been totally paralyzed ever since, and I've been in and out of different institutions with him during the years.

One marvelous thing I've seen, every now and then, is a nurse who falls in love with her patient. At that point, she becomes a lover and not just a worker. She delights to go above and beyond the call of duty.

When workers become lovers, they throw away the obligatory checklist. They no longer need it. Their lovesick hearts provide a higher and more trustworthy rule to live and work by. When that happens between us and our heavenly Bridegroom, there will be no self-congratulation or religious self-determination in our efforts to serve Him—only an overflow of love.

When we extravagantly obey God out of a fascinated, exhilarated heart, we come to the position of the bride in Song of Solomon, who pursues her Bridegroom out of "lovesickness" (see Song 2:5; 5:8). While this love song speaks of the beauty of natural married love, a second and important interpretation reveals the beauty of spiritual love for Jesus. It is a picture of the relationship between Christ and His church. In the last days God is going to cause the church—despite tribulations and persecutions—to possess a glad, exhilarated heart rooted in lovesickness for her Bridegroom, Jesus.

The Beauty of God

The beauty of God is the ultimate fascination of the bride. Isaiah 4:2 says, "The Branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious." This speaks of the Holy Spirit's emphasis on the beauty of Jesus at the end of the age.

The human race has a longing for fascination and beauty; we can neither repent of it nor quench it. The secular entertainment industry has exploited this longing, providing us with a fascination that not only breaks us but causes us to be dependent upon it—so that we come back for more of that which destroys.

The truth is that when we're not wholehearted or fascinated, we're vulnerable to temptation. The church in the Western world right now is suffering from chronic boredom and passivity. We're vulnerable to the enticements of entertainment and sin. But the bridal paradigm offers the antidote: All our longings to be fascinated will be satisfied as God reveals Himself as our Bridegroom in the divine romance.

The invitation to be the bride of Christ is a unique privilege for the redeemed that far surpasses the position of the angels. It is not a matter of being male or female. Just as women are "sons of God," so also men are the "bride of Christ."

The bridal position describes a relationship of nearness to the heart of God and insight into the beauty of God that transcends gender. Consider King David, the most lovesick man in the Old Testament.

Struck with the beauty of God, he wrote, "One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord" (Ps. 27:4). David never lost that sense of fascination and awe with the One he loved—the One who first loved him.

When we begin to see Jesus as our Bridegroom, we will no longer consider ourselves task-doers who sacrifice to obey a distant God; nor will we define ourselves by our struggle and our sin. We'll be lovers of God—even while we're struggling. We will say, "I'm a lover of God! Yes, I acknowledge my weakness, but I'm more than a sinful servant. I'm the bride of Christ."

The fact is, a wedding is set to take place at the end of natural history—the culmination of a divine romance more exciting, more exhilarating, than anything the world has ever imagined. Jesus, our Bridegroom, loves us with a fiery love that will last for all eternity. As the bride of Christ, let us make ourselves ready.

Read a companion devotional.

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