

Revelation 21:9-14 [NIV]

One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." ¹⁰ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. ¹¹ It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. ¹² It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. ¹³ There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. ¹⁴ The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

The book of Revelation, Chapter 21, is our text today, if you'd care to take a Bible and turn there. We'll get there in a few minutes.

Considering the many assertions that have been made about Jesus through the centuries, one of the most provocative and even startling is surely the suggestion that Jesus was married.

That thought has come up from time to time, usually because someone suggests a new way to interpret some passage, or maybe some new fragment of ancient writing is discovered.

The question has been around for far longer, but it last made headlines, I believe, in about 2012, when a new ancient fragment (I think it was dated from the fourth century) was found, even though the scholars who presented the idea admitted it didn't really prove anything.

And, the person who is almost always suspected of being Mrs. Jesus is Mary Magdalene.

Let's talk about her for a minute.

The truth is, as intriguing a person as she is, there is far more *supposed* about Mary Magdalene than is *stated* in the Bible.

Things like the musical, *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, and the book, *The Da Vinci Code*, have taken great liberties in their presentations of Mary. You've probably *heard*, and *maybe* even *believed* some of this is **Scriptural**: that she was a *prostitute* or that she was *in love* with Jesus.

Yet none of that appears in the Bible.

All we know, for sure, about Mary is that:

First, she was one of a few women who financially supported Jesus' ministry (Luke 8:1-3).

Second, she witnessed Jesus' death and was one of the first, if not *the* first, to see Him resurrected (John 20:11-18).

Third, her life was radically transformed by Jesus, who had cast at least seven demons out of her (Luke 8:1-3).

And then fourth, based on Acts 1:14, she was probably among those who awaited the descent of the Holy Spirit after Jesus ascended.

That's really all we know, for sure, about her.

So, why have so many other things been suggested about her and her relationship with Jesus?

Maybe the whole idea of "seven demons" is just too provocative a thought to leave alone, and since no more detail than that is given, we tend to jump to conclusions about the specific type of sins that seven demons might drive a person to commit.

Maybe, since we're not told that Mary was, or wasn't, married, we just can't resist trying to put her together with someone—even Jesus, like what some busybody matchmaker might do.

Regardless, let me say this: believe what the Bible says about Mary, but don't allow mere guesses, no matter how attractively they're presented, to fill in the blanks.

And speaking of blanks, please understand that there is zero scriptural evidence to support Jesus being married.

No mentions. No allusions. No sideways glances toward it.

So why has this idea kept coming up?

About eight years ago, the *National Catholic Reporter*, of all places, suggested some reasons which are helpful to keep in mind about our perspective of *many* topics like this.

First, biblical archaeology tends to prime people for surprises. We're ready to believe new things because excavations in the Holy Land have, truly, yielded remarkable artifacts that do provide insights, often unexpected ones, into Bible history. Because we tend to value archaeological evidence, we, intentionally or not, sometimes try to make it say or prove more than it actually does.

Second, again, whether or not we realize it or would admit it, most of us prefer to think about Jesus as one who is made in our image. We're more comfortable with a Jesus who is like us. So, if we're not intentional and careful, that's what we assume, just due to the remnants of self-interest within us.

Some historians, usually liberal ones, over the past couple hundred years, have fed periodic "quests" for the historical Jesus, or the "real" Jesus. Interestingly, though, *and tellingly*, these explorations usually wind up giving us a Jesus that looks *just like us*—something Albert Schweitzer noted more than a century ago.

More recently, Jesus has been presented as a successful businessman, a Marxist, a political zealot, a vegetarian—even as a gay man—and maybe most

commonly, a man married with children. A sort of 1950's style savior who appeals to a middle-class America.

Yet none of that can, in any way, be concluded from Scripture.

It takes conscious effort for us to remember that Jesus is *not* "just like us." We always have to check our self-interest at the door when we're making conclusions about Jesus.

A third reason the issue of a married Jesus keeps coming up is that people tend to believe that, well, every nice boy gets married, right?

We've tried to make Jesus the nice guy next door, so of course he was married – and particularly so if He was Jewish, because every Jewish man marries and has a bunch of kids.

Of course, that's unreasonably stereotypical, even for Jesus' day. People forget that, in Jesus' day, there were monastic-like communities of celibate Jews – the Essenes, for example – who were highly, highly regarded.

So, to be single was, and still is, an entirely viable, worthy and respectable calling.

Our worth is not found in our marital status, but some people, sadly, have a hard time accepting or remembering that.

A fourth reason we want to think of Jesus as being married is because, generally speaking, people like conspiracies more than they like facts.

They'd rather imagine, because it's more fun to imagine something juicy and edgy than it is to believe the blatant, if unexciting, truth.

People are prone to wonder if there wasn't something else going on. A cover-up maybe, or something else under the radar, and this temptation is especially strong when it has to do with sexuality and chastity!

From the Kennedy assassination to the moon landing, from UFOs to Bigfoot to the Chupacabra to Q-Anon, people have a love affair with conspiracy theories, and in an era marked by deep mistrust of institutions, including the institutional church, any claim made is suspect.

And then last, but certainly not least, some want Jesus to be married because the emergence of women's rights, though a huge development of modernity – due, in large part to Christian influence – was not widely embraced in Jesus' day.

The maleness of the twelve disciples underlines this.

And even though Jesus did more than any other person in history to emphasize the worth of women, some today, who see everything through the lens of women's rights, push their preoccupations too far with their imaginations of a Mrs. Mary Magdalene-Jesus.

Those are just some of the reasons why you see this non-biblical idea of a married Jesus, and frankly other non-biblical ideas, over and over again through the ages.

The fact is, there is nothing in the New Testament or in any early Christian history or tradition that remotely supports a married Jesus.

There *is*, however, much talk in the New Testament about Jesus having a *wife* – or more *commonly*, a *bride*,

which, of course, would be the Church: the body of true believers, the whole of those who follow Him.

And that's what we'll be talking about for a few weeks here: Jesus' wife, the Church – including the idea of it, the significance of it, the importance of it, and the characteristics of it.

We're going to look at why, of all possible metaphors, that of a wife – a bride – would become the image that links Him to His people.

And by way of preview, I'll just say this: that choice of metaphor really says a lot more about Him than it does about the Church.

But it does say plenty about the Church and her value and what He thinks of her, which suggests to us what we ought to think of her as well.

And this is important, because, it seems to me that even we who are part of her,

may, from time to time, think less of Jesus' bride than He'd prefer.

Let me assure you, we don't want Jesus to ever find us insulting His wife.

That's where we're heading in the days to come, but for today, let me mention just a couple quick things about Revelation 21.

I'm pretty sure that this is the only place in the Bible where the church, or anyone else, is explicitly called Jesus' "wife." It may have actually taken you by surprise to hear it read or to see it in your Bible. But be assured it's not just a strange or mistaken English translation.

The Greek work is *gunaika*, which explains why all the translations, that I looked at anyway, use the English word, "wife."

And actually, the word *nymphen*, which is the Greek word for "bride," is in the same sentence.

There in verse 9, John reports that, "*one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.'*"

What's going on here? Well, this is all a part of John's vision: an angel showing him, in apocalyptic and prophetic style, some of the things to come in the last days. This was all meant, not just to inform, but to encourage and hearten John, and all those in the days to come who would hear these words.

The interesting thing here is the tremendous contrast that the angel presents.

You see, just a bit before this, back in chapters 17 and 18, we find the same angel, we presume, showing John another vision: the vision of a prostitute (one who is unfaithful) who has deceived so many around the world – and her utter destruction.

We have here a vision of the beauty and endurance of those who embrace God, and the ugliness and destruction of those who reject Him.

You see, there are both in this world, just as there have been both through the ages: persons or groups of persons who are faithful to God and those who are not.

There are people who work *with* God and people who work *against* Him.

There are people who believe Him and people who deny Him.

And, there are people who have linked themselves to Jesus, God's savior (He's referred to here as the Lamb, the sacrifice for our sins), and there are people who have rejected Him.

So, this is nothing new, you see? The prophets all through Judaism realized all this and predicted this.

Jesus Himself understood it. He didn't like it, but He realized this is simply the reality of persons who possess a truly free will: the same sort of will God has and the sort of will that makes us like Him in constitution and in image.

And even though He invites all to Himself, some will choose Him and some will reject Him.

Those who will choose Him – the faithful, He will embrace and make His very own.

Those who reject Him and follow other gods, including the god of self and the god of stuff (self-worshippers, stuff-worshippers): they will suffer the consequences of their choice.

Here, the images of the faithful and the faithless are presented as cities.

The faithless are as Babylon, a city – a nation – long associated not only with the rejection of the God of Israel, the one true God, but a people who actively persecuted and destroyed those who loved and served God. This is the prostitute, you see?

This is the people or the city which is full of ugliness and vileness and impurity and faithlessness. And it will be destroyed. They are destined for destruction.

But the faithful: they who are a part of the city of God, the city of Jerusalem. They are a people of beauty, because God has made them so.

They are those who have chosen to follow their Creator and their Redeemer, and so they are experiencing redemption. They are being made new, remade into all that they were originally created to be: full of purity and goodness and truth and light and life, because they are full of God Himself, you see?

There is a tremendous splendor about this group, this city, this people. It's something John probably has trouble grasping and communicating, because, in human terms, how do you even begin to describe the glory of God?

Verse 11 says, *"The city shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal."*

Today we might say, "Bright as a laser, or one of those high intensity headlights that blind you at night when they come toward you."

The glory – the brilliance – is beyond description. Why?

Because God lives here. He lives in those who follow Him, and so they are being made, and have been made, *here*, like Him. These are His re-created people: clear, pure, bright and brilliant – completely uncorrupted by sin.

You say, "Well, that describes Jesus."

Yes, it does. But the great news is that this also describes the people of Jesus – all who follow Jesus and who will be, one day, completely united with Him as His bride.

This is the people of Jesus – living fully with Him in the very presence of God Himself.

This is the Church. We're not talking about a building.

And we're not talking about those who come and just sit Sunday after Sunday in buildings like this.

The Church is the collection of all those who truly follow Jesus.

They are the ones described here.

They are the ones destined for brilliance.

The process has already begun in all those who follow Christ now. Even now, we are being made pure. That's what the Spirit of Christ is trying to accomplish in our lives even today. Purifying our minds and hearts. Making us holy.

That's why when we're doing something that's contrary to Jesus and His character, His Spirit says to us, "Hey, you shouldn't be doing that. You shouldn't be putting that into your mind and heart."

That's His Spirit moving us toward purity, toward His own brilliance.

That's why His word says things like,

*"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."*¹

*"Flee from sexual immorality."*²

*"Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry."*³

*"Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."*⁴

*"Renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and – live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age –"*⁵

And a whole lot more.

God's word tells us those things because for all who will listen to Him, you see, He is preparing us. We are becoming! Followers of Jesus are, even now, in training for *brilliance*, because we are now, and we are to be fully one day, the very *bride* – the *wife* of Christ.

All who are, all who have been, and all who will be in Jesus, in days past, now, and in days to come: we are the bride of Christ; we are part of who John, right here, is describing and anticipating.

You know, in our day today, you hear about the following of different earthly entities – referred to as "nations."

In the Pittsburgh area, where I'm from, you heard about "Steeler Nation." The black and gold.

¹ Matthew 5:8

² 1 Corinthians 6:18

³ Colossians 3:5

⁴ Philippians 4:8

⁵ Titus 2:12

In Columbus, it's the "Buckeye Nation." The scarlet and gray.

Here everything is about "Wildcat Nation." Kentucky blue!

But here, you see, John is describing and presenting "Jesus Nation." Clear and pure and shining like the most magnificent jewels.

Jesus Nation: all who follow, all who are faithful, all who trust and believe and live for Him, like a magnificent city—God's city in all its perfect glory, descending upon the earth.

But that metaphor just isn't enough. Our connection with Jesus is more than that, you see?

The connection of Jesus with those who will follow Him is so complete and so intimate and so permanent that it can only be adequately described as a marriage.

We who are in Jesus: we're not merely His servants, His subjects, His flunkies, His court or His people or His city or His nation.

We together: we are His wife.

He is the groom and we are the bride.

All He does, He does with the goal of making us all we can possibly be.

He is ours and we are His forever.

You who are in Christ, that's who you are.

We who are in Christ, that's who we are.

That's who we're becoming, and who we'll forever be. Because we're just that valuable and beautiful to God.

Do you know that about yourself—you who are in Christ?

Do you understand that about your brothers and sisters in Christ?

Friends, we need to learn this—to grasp this, so we see Jesus for who He is, and so we see and treat ourselves and one another as who we are: people of great worth, great value, and great beauty to God.

Not for our own glory, but all for the glory of Jesus, the Groom.

Closing Song: 283 - We Are God's People

Benediction