

To God Alone Be The Glory

I love looking at wedding photos. What a great reminder of the day when two people committed themselves to the goal of filling their home with love. There are few things in this earthly life that can bring more joy than a good marriage. It is also true that there are few things in this earthly life which can bring deeper sadness than an unhappy marriage. So if you're single and you want to marry, choose wisely. Live a pure life while you wait to see if the Lord makes a decent spouse available for you to marry, and choose wisely. And if you're married, recommit yourself to show love to your spouse, especially in how you talk.

Think how a typical wedding service goes. The groom stands up front, waiting for his bride to walk down the aisle. At the right moment he walks a few steps up the aisle to receive his bride from her father and leads her up into the chancel, near the altar, the symbol of God's presence, and he takes her as his very own precious wife. That's just like Jesus will do on the Last Day. Right now he waits in heaven, preparing a place for us, his dear bride, building his home for us, the Church.

Think how at a typical wedding service, the bride walks down the aisle. Usually she wears a white dress. Why? because she stands for the Church. Underneath the dress is perspiration, freckles, birth

marks, maybe some scars, all of which remind us of the imperfections of our sinful heart and all the evil behavior it is capable of. But no one ever thinks of a bride that way. They see the beautiful white dress. As it covers all her imperfections and makes her the most beautiful woman in the building, so the robe of Christ's righteousness covers all our sins. Christ has cleansed us by the washing with water through the Word (baptism). He has presented us to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless (Ephesians 5:25-27). He paid for our beautiful white wedding dress with his life. That's how we know he loves us. He thinks we are the most beautiful thing in the world.

Now what would you think of a woman who, on her wedding day, wakes up, puts on her wedding dress, goes outside, and rolls in the mud? Oh, wait, that's not heinous enough. Let's say she goes all around town that morning, sharing her favors with anyone who is willing. What if you are the groom standing at the front of the church waiting for her? Ouch! That hurts! But isn't this exactly what you and I do when we choose to sin. We take that which was to be only for our husband (the Lord), and we give it to things and people, as if they are gods and we are making an offering. The heavenly Groom Jesus wants his Bride the Church to gather around his Word and spend time with him each week, but sometimes she stays

up too late on Saturday, and then she's too tired for worship. The Lord wants his Bride to share with her friends the good news about free forgiveness in Jesus, but she is often afraid of losing her friends. So by her silence she says, "I love them more than I love you, Husband." The Lord wants his Bride to use the gift of speech only for building others up in faith, but she often thinks it's more satisfying to gripe about others or make nasty comments on how stupid their decisions are. "Come on, Lord, isn't it enough that I dragged myself out of bed and came to worship this morning? What? You want me to bring you a generous thank offering too? Can't you just take the leftovers I give you? Twenty bucks should keep you off my back for a while."

In Old Testament times Israel was the Lord's bride. No other nation was treated with such grace all those years. But Israel preferred things that God says are evil. When Israel repeatedly turned her back on the Lord, he sent her away, like a divorce. The armies of other nations came in and deported the Israelites. Everyone in the world called Jerusalem "Deserted." And because no one claimed the land to work it and take care of it, they called the land "Desolate." That's what we were like before the Holy Spirit connected us to Christ: ugly, deserted, desolate. Not a pretty picture.

But that's what makes the Lord's actions

so awesome. It would have been right for him to leave us sitting in the mud puddle or wandering the streets, deserted, desolate, unclaimed. But notice his splendid attitude toward us in today's sermon text. *For Zion's sake I will not keep silent* (Zion is a hill on which Jerusalem was built), *for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet* ("Jerusalem" in the Old Testament often means "the Church"), ["I will not rest"] *till her righteousness shines out like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch.*

This is the Lord talking, not Isaiah, and he's on a mission. We can relate: when we set a goal, we work hard until the project is accomplished. It feels so good to achieve our goal. Well, God set a goal, and he will not rest or be silent until the glory of his Church has become fact and truth. He intends to keep talking through his Word until Israel (the Church) knows that she is righteous in his sight, ...until it's as clearly seen as a blazing torch, which sends out shafts of light to the retinas of those nearby. And so God continues to raise up parents who are willing to tell children what their baptism means for them, and Sunday School teachers who are willing to bring out the truths of God from Bible history. The Lord raises up people who are willing to tell their friends what Jesus means to them since he died on the cross for them. The Lord raises up young people who are willing to become teachers in Christian schools, not only to teach math and reading but also the Word

of God. He raises up pastors who are willing to go wherever the Lord directs them through the calls of congregations. He raises up staff ministers to take on important ministry functions in churches.

God won't stop blessing his bride until, as he says to her in our text, *"The nations will see your righteousness and all kings your glory."* Sometimes the Church's glory shines a little already now. Some people see what good the Lord is doing for his followers, and they say, "I want some of that; teach me about your Jesus too." Others get jealous about what the Lord is doing for his people, and they persecute Christians. But on the Last Day, everyone will see the Church (us believers) as the radiant Bride of Christ.

"You will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow." It is still common for a bride to receive a new name on her wedding day. That action marks a major change in her life. Every time she hears her new name, she can remember the special relationship that now exists between her and the one who has openly declared his love for her. On the last day, the Lord of glory will bestow a new name on us, which we'll hear about in a moment.

But first, the Lord wants to draw another picture for us. Not only are we his bride, but we *"will be a crown of splendor in the Lord's hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God."* A diadem or crown is the most glorious, the

most beautiful ornament available to a king. The Church is the Lord's most precious and glorious work, His masterpiece. Compare the Church to the sky and the earth. On the Last Day they will pass away, but not the Church. We are held in the hand of the Lord as a crown he puts on his head—amazing! Kenny Rogers used to sing: "You decorated my life." What a nice way of saying, "You've been good for me, you've been a blessing to me, you've made me happy." Well, by calling the church a crown, the Lord is saying we decorate him. God's greatest glory is seen in how he forgives all the sinners who believe in him, how he established and preserves the Church, his master work, his crowning achievement. We are his crown. We are also his bride, we who roll in the mud, we who give our favors away in the streets. Look! The groom is leaving the wedding hall. He's looking for us and refusing to stop till he finds us. He points to our filthy garments and urges us to acknowledge our need for his help. Then he bathes us in his purifying blood, offers us a new wedding dress, and takes us back to the wedding hall where we wait for the trumpets to blow, signaling it is finally time for the wedding feast to begin.

"No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate. But you will be called Hephzibah, and your land Beulah; for the Lord will take delight in you, and your land will be married." Friends and enemies of Israel were

saying that she was deserted and forsaken (desolate) when Babylon sacked Jerusalem in 586 B.C. From time to time it does appear that the Church on earth is deserted by the Lord. Some churches have to close their elementary schools for lack of children or close their doors for lack of people. Sometimes missions close for lack of funding. Sometimes God's people face persecution for their connection to Jesus. But through Isaiah the Lord is teaching us: don't call the Church "deserted" or "desolate"! CALL HER HEPHZIBAH. Hephzibah? To our American ears, that may sound like a good name for a fat cat or a big sow. But Hephzibah is Hebrew for, "My delight is in her." Just think: we cause God delight! CALL HER HEPHZIBAH, for the Lord delights in her for his own reasons.

And **Call Her Land Beulah**. This one is a little trickier: 'Beulah' is the opposite of 'Desolate.' A land that is desolate is uninhabited, unimproved, because it is unclaimed. This Hebrew word refuses to be communicated through just one English word. Beulah means more than just "married." The more basic meaning of "Beulah" is "to have, be in possession of, be the rightful owner of, be lord over." In other cultures the husband is said to own and be lord over his wife. In our culture we cringe at the thought of a husband owning his wife, because we don't like it when anyone has an unfair advantage over someone else. But move beyond the picture to see what

it means: for Israel exiled in Babylon it meant, "Your people will come back to Judah and again be the rightful possessors of the land." For us believers today, "call her Beulah" means we will possess heaven. We will be lords in God's heavenly city, not with any earthly sense of dominion, but as in "We, his Bride, will rule with Christ."

As a young man marries a maiden, so will your sons marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.

Husbands, do you remember the day you married your wife? Remember how delighted you were as she walked down the aisle toward you? That's how the Lord feels about you all the time. He rejoices over all of you because through faith in Jesus you are pure and holy in his sight. Even if you're not married right now, you can still understand what the picture means for you. You can imagine what it's like to be a bridegroom, to look at someone with whom you are about to declare publicly, "I will give my love and affection to no one else but you." We can understand how the Lord feels toward us.

So don't ever call yourself Deserted or Desolate. Your name is Hephzibah, for the Lord delights in you. Your name is Beulah, for you are claimed. You are the Lord's bride and his crown.