Jesus – the Bridegroom

1. Introduction

John 3:22-30 *After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing.* ***23*** *John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized* ***24*** *(for John had not yet been put in prison).*

25 *Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification.* ***26*** *And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him."* ***27*** *John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.* ***28*** *You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.'* ***29*** *The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete.* ***30*** *He must increase, but I must decrease."*

a. This is a familiar passage to us at NFHOP. The identity of Christ as the Bridegroom and ourselves as the Bride are common themes in our bible study over the years. In fact, our mission statement makes that really clear. NFHOP exists to "*Exalt Jesus and prepare his Bride for his return."*

b. In this session we will revisit some of what we have considered before (revisiting helps us go deeper in our revelation). However, we will also seek to gain greater revelation of our relationship with Jesus as we consider the words of John the Baptist.

c. In this scene John has moved into another region, away from where Jesus is ministering. This is before John the Baptist is imprisoned and therefore before Jesus calls all his disciples.

Mark 1:14-20 *Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God,* ***15*** *and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."* ***16*** *Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen.* ***17*** *And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men."* ***18*** *And immediately they left their nets and followed him.* ***19*** *And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets.* ***20*** *And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.*

d. It is likely that, at this time, Jesus has a number of followers, including the early disciples that were mentioned in John 1, and he was spending time with them to help them understand and appreciate who He really was. When, later, he calls the disciples to leave everything behind and follow him it is probably because he has come to know those ones who he wishes to join with him in his ministry.

e. However, in our passage for today we see those who had remained with John the Baptist probably feeling threatened by Jesus' ministry as it was drawing the crowds away from John the Baptist. John's response is clear, "*He must increase, but I must decrease*". John's role was to prepare the people for the one who was coming, as we saw in John 1, and he makes it clear to his disciples that this is God's purpose – that the people are following Jesus because this is the work of God in heaven.

John 3:27 *John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.*

f. John then goes on to explain his relationship to Jesus by referring back to the familiar identity of God to the people of Israel from the Old Testament, that of a betrothed Bridegroom. In doing so he mentions three characters; the Bridegroom, the Bride and the friend of the Bridegroom.

2. The Bridegroom

a. Throughout the Old Testament there are many references to the relationship between God and Israel as a betrothal. In Jewish culture the betrothal was a binding covenant between the man and the woman which was finally consummated at the wedding. In the ancient world, a couple were legally married on the day they were betrothed. Each one made binding covenant commitments to give their all to each other.

b. This is not just some figurative way of looking at our partnership in covenant with God. Jeremiah understood that the covenant that God had made with Israel at Mt. Sinai was the Lord's betrothal to Israel.

Jer. 2:2 *Cry in the hearing of Jerusalem, saying, "…I remember you, the kindness of your youth, the love of your betrothal, when you went after Me in the wilderness."*

Jer. 31:32 *"…the covenant that I made…I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them," says the LORD.*

c. Jeremiah began his ministry with a bridal perspective of God's kingdom (Jer. 2-3)

Jer. 3:14 *"Return, O backsliding children," says the LORD, "for I am married to you."*

d. What is evident from these scriptures is that in God's own words Israel was married to Him. We have got so used to using the word "covenant" but I think we need to understand that it is a marriage covenant. Why is that so important? Because a marriage implies emotional as well as contractual commitment. God was not just making some sort of legal agreement with His people, he was binding himself to them in love and commitment and when they behave in a way that walks away from that commitment it has an impact on Him – He sees it as adultery.

e. The Lord commanded Hosea to take a wife of harlotry at the beginning of his prophetic ministry because Israel (the northern kingdom) was engaged in harlotry by departing from the Lord.

Hos. 1:2-3 *[2]When the LORD began to speak by Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea: "Go, take yourself a wife of harlotry and children of harlotry, for the land has committed great harlotry by departing from the LORD." [3]So he went and took Gomer…and she conceived and bore him a son.*

f. God compared Hosea's unfaithful wife, Gomer, to unfaithful Israel in her rebellion (Hos. 2:2-13). The Lord wanted Hosea's pain-filled marriage to be a prophetic picture of how the Lord feels about His relationship to his people when they are unfaithful to him. Hosea's story is told in Hosea 1-3. *Interestingly Hosea chose Gomer knowing she was a harlot – God chose his bride knowing that she would be unfaithful and that would bring him great pain.*

g. This equipped him to be the first prophet to reveal the heart of the Bridegroom God (Hos. 2:16-20). This passage is very relevant in the generation Jesus returns when the Spirit will emphasise Him as the Bridegroom God (in context to judging the Antichrist's empire) and the spiritual identity of the body of Christ as His Bride.

Rev. 22:17, 20 *[17]And the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!"… [20]"Surely I [Jesus] am coming quickly." Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!*

h. Only by understanding Jesus' heart as a loving Bridegroom can we rightly interpret His judgments. He loves His people so much that He will release His judgments ***to remove all that hinders love***. Many do not have a grid for the "severe mercy" that the Bridegroom God will release to discipline His people to wake them up to love. One of the greatest miracles in history is the transformation of the end-time church from a lukewarm spirit (Rev. 3:16) to being a fully prepared Bride (Rev. 19:7).

3. The Bride

a. In the same way that this marriage covenant between God and his people reveals an emotional commitment from God it also implies a similar emotional response from us as his Bride. We are not called to just keep the terms of the covenant but also to relate to Jesus with the love and devotion of his betrothed Bride. Our obedience should be based on affection for the one who loves us.

i ***"Affection-based obedience"*** is obedience that flows from experiencing Jesus' affection for us and then giving it back to Him. It is the strongest and most consistent kind of obedience.

ii ***"Duty-based obedience"*** is our commitment to obedience even if we do not feel God's presence. God's Word requires that we obey God even when we do not feel inspired to do so. We obey because God is our creator and redeemer; thus He has the right to require our obedience.

iii ***"Fear-based obedience"*** is obedience motivated by the fear of negative consequences. This, too, is biblical. If we are not motivated to obey God by His Word speaking to our heart, then God will use His rod because He loves us too much to leave us in compromise (Heb. 12:5-11).

Heb. 12:6 *For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."[7] It is for discipline that you have to endure.*

b. However, fear-based obedience is not sufficient to motivate us to resist the pleasures of sin consistently over time. Many use shame and fear as the primary way to motivate people to obey God. Holiness is often presented in a negative way, with many warnings of the consequences of sin. God's Word has clear prohibitions, but they were not designed to transform the heart. Yes, we do present the consequences of sin, yet we realise this alone is not sufficient. The fear of consequences does not overpower the tendency to sin–it merely causes people to sin in secret.

c. Many believers who rest in the assurance of being forgiven are still striving to find purpose for their life. There is a God-shaped vacuum in our hearts that can only be fulfilled in the "rest of intimacy." In this place we can be prepared and prepare others for all that is and is to come and partner with Jesus to hasten His return.

2 Peter 3:11-13 *[11] Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, [12] waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! [13] But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.*

d. To grow in revelation and understanding of our relationship to Jesus as our Bridegroom there is no better book in the Bible than the Song of Solomon. One of the greatest needs for all of us in the Church today is to understand Jesus' love more fully and more deeply than we did before. We need to experience the heart of God in a deeper way because this progressive experience

draws us nearer to God, focuses and transforms our hearts and minds and trains us to live in true partnership with Jesus which will be fully revealed when He returns.

e. Even in our immaturity and weakness God sees the fullness of who he has created us to be and calls us to go with him – to grow in maturity and fulfil our destiny as his partner for all eternity. It is as His Bride that we will rule and reign in the Messianic Kingdom.

f. The Song tells the story of how the young maiden grew until she became a Bride filled with the fire of God. By the end of the journey she knows who she is. In chapter 8 we see her interceding for the church (8:8–9) and for Jesus' presence (8:14). In verse 10, we see her threefold confidence as a wall (selfless motives), as a tower (supernatural ability to nurture), and as one with peace (all emotional hindrances in her are removed).

g. The Bride experiences the power and enjoyment of living before His eyes instead of before the eyes of men. Her sense of importance is rooted in eternity as she has revelation of giving account before God (8:11). The Bride has a revelation of her spiritual maturity before God (8:12).

h. The King gives His final commission to the Bride. Her urgency is expressed in prayer. His last words to her commend her faithfulness in serving the Church. She continued to dwell in His gardens serving God's people. She did not quit or retreat into selfish isolation.

Song 8:13-14 *[13]You who dwell in the gardens [the Bride], the companions listen for your voice—Let Me [Jesus] hear it! [14]Make haste, my Beloved [Jesus], and be like a gazelle or a young stag on the mountains of spices.*

i. The Bride responds to the King's request to hear her voice as she intercedes for Him to come. She prays that the presence of the King would come quickly to her and the others. She calls to Him to come in His victorious strength and power, like a gazelle or a young stag. The Bride is calling upon Him to return at the end of the age to bring an end to every opposition, and establish His Kingdom. The whole earth will become the dwelling place of God, brought to fullness by the presence of the King. This cry of intercession is the chief role of the Bride as we await the return of Jesus as King of kings, and Lord of lords.

4. The friend of the Bridegroom

a. Having reminded his disciples of Jesus' identity as the Bridegroom John goes on to explain his relationship to Jesus as the "friend of the Bridegroom".

John 3:29 *The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete.*

b. In the illustration Jesus is the bridegroom and John is the bridegroom's friend. The friend of the bridegroom was the assistant who acted on behalf of the bridegroom and made the preliminary arrangements for the ceremony. In some way this would equate in our tradition to the best man.

c. John is making it clear that he is not the one on whom the focus is set he is just the one preparing the people for the main event. Once Jesus, the Bridegroom appears all eyes should be on him. John was therefore implying that he played a supporting role in Messiah's union with Israel. This was a testimony to Jesus' identity as Messiah whom John said he rejoiced to hear.

d. When John the Baptist spoke these words the church was an unknown entity in God's plan, so it is unlikely that it was in his mind. However, in the days of the early church Paul refers several times to the church being the bride of Christ (e.g., 2 Cor.11:2; Eph.5:25-32). As those grafted into Israel we too become part of the Bride of Christ.

e. Why does the friend of the bridegroom — John the Baptist — say he rejoices greatly over the bridegroom's voice? One reason would be because Jesus is now here and John is rejoicing in the fulfilment of the prophetic promises and the climax of his own ministry.

f. However, I think it is more than that. John the Baptist described himself in John 1:23 as *"the voice"* crying in the wilderness. His own voice has gathered a people. But now they are all leaving and going to Jesus. Why? Because another voice is being heard. A greater voice. A stronger voice.

John 10:3–4 *The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. . . . The sheep follow him, for they know his voice.*

g. The bridegroom has the bride because the bride has a voice which responds to him and the bride knows the voice of her husband. The bride leaves John and goes to her bridegroom. John rejoices in the voice of the bridegroom, not just because the bridegroom is here, but because the voice gathers the bride — and it gathers her away from John. Which is why the next words out of his mouth in verse 30 are, *"He must increase, but I must decrease."* It must be so and in this, John rejoices.

h. The "must" of verse 30 is very important. This is God's must of a divine plan. In verse 27, God gives people to Jesus, and they leave John the Baptist and go to Jesus. This is God's doing. In verse 28, God sends John not to be the Christ but to go before and point to him. So it's God's plan that John gathers a people and then sends them away to Jesus. This is part of the divine "must" of verse 30.

i. John focuses on the bridegroom's voice because this is a voice superior to his own voice. This voice raises the dead (John 5:25; 11:43). This voice is known by all the sheep, and they follow (John 10:3–4). This voice woos and wins the bride. She knows her husband and goes to him. The one who has the bride is the bridegroom.

j. So John sums up God's work in verse 30: "He must increase and I must decrease." The Son of God, the bridegroom, will be exalted. He will be glorified. He will increase in the eyes of man. Or as verse 21 says, it will be "clearly seen" that the new works of all his people are his work.

k. In the same way we are also called to be friends of the Bridegroom. As John prepared the hearts of the people to respond to the voice of the Bridegroom at his first coming so we need to be those who prepare ourselves and others to respond to what Jesus is saying as we approach his return. That is why our mission statement says, "*Exalting Jesus and preparing his Bride for his return".*

l. It is not about us or our works it is about exalting Jesus our Bridegroom and being prepared to hear his voice and follow him as we make ourselves ready for our wedding day at the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Rev.19:7[7] *Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready;* [8] *it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure"*

5. End times friends of the Bridegroom

a. Isaiah 40 prophecies these ones who cry out:

Isaiah 40:3-5 *A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.* [4] *Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the*

uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. [5] And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

b. Isaiah prophesied end-time forerunners. They will prepare the way of the Lord at the time when all flesh sees the manifest glory of God together in the events culminating with Jesus' return. John the Baptist fulfilled this passage but only in part. Its complete fulfilment will occur only when all flesh sees God's glory together in the end times.

c. John prepared people by ministering as a prophet and evangelist, calling many to come to Jesus. He announced Jesus' first coming while winning souls and making disciples by teaching them to pray, fast, and live righteously (Mt. 9:14; Lk. 3:3-18; 11:1).

d. We are to imitate John the Baptist's dedication and message since Jesus described him as having a burning heart and being a shining lamp of ministry that clearly made known God's values and ways. John brought together the forerunner lifestyle (burning heart) with the forerunner message (lamp).

John 5: 35 *He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.*

e. Jesus described John as the greatest man in history. No one ever obeyed God more consistently nor prepared for ministry more diligently than John the Baptist.

Matt. 11:10-11 *This is he of whom it is written, "'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.' [11] Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.*

f. The best man in a wedding does not seek to draw the bride's attention and affections to himself but to prepare her to receive the embrace of the Bridegroom. Paul spoke of ministries who preached or showcased "themselves" (2 Cor. 4:5; Phil. 2:19-21). Friends of the Bridegroom prepare people to receive Jesus' embrace as the Bridegroom God empowering them to walk out the first commandment.

g. John described the joyful, emotional impact that hearing the Bridegroom's voice had on him and was empowered by revelation of Jesus as the Bridegroom God with sustainable joy even in the difficulty of a desert lifestyle. This speaks of his gratitude and being preoccupied with Jesus instead of the difficulty of this lifestyle. He had no complaints or regrets about the lonely, fasted lifestyle.

h. The "Bridegroom message" calls us to a life abandoned to Jesus and living in the joy of encountering him in intimacy.

6. Conclusion

a. As his Bride we cry out from a heart ignited by his love. In intercession we cry out for him to come and set all wrong things right. We long for the return of our Bridegroom.

b. As the friends of the Bridegroom we live out a life of abandonment to Jesus preparing ourselves by going deep in God through studying the Scripture with prayer and fasting, walking in purity, ministering to people, and learning to minister in the Spirit's power. **Because of love**, we prepare ourselves to prepare others for the greatest transition in history.

c. Like Paul we have a divine jealousy for God's people that our Bridegroom will receive his inheritance of a pure and spotless Bride who longs for the day of her wedding.

2 Cor.11:2 *For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.*