

Remembering Who We Are

Marriage and the Bride of Christ

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I really have appreciated the Feast and all that has taken place so far. I cannot believe how we are coming into alignment with each other, because the title of my sermon today is, "Remembering Who We Are." Really knowing who we are at this end time is of the utmost importance to us. This realization seems to have been on my mind almost all year long. In the sermonettes and sermons that I have given, especially on the West Coast, I have tried to remind us to not forget "who we are"—that we are special.

We can continue to come to church (as does the world) and certainly we can continue to hear wonderful messages; but, unless we really understand who we are, we will not be motivated to overcome in the right way. We will not have the energy to overcome. We will not have the zeal.

We will not have the hope that comes from knowing who we are. Once that slips, then we begin to slip all over and we become an easy target for Satan.

Those who attend the churches in the world, for the most part, attend the organizations as part of their empirical self, or their empirical environment. The empirical self is *my* baseball team, *my* car, *my* town, *my* mayor, *my* country, and *my* church—that type of thing. It is, in a sense, the way of life that they are used too.

Certainly we have an empirical self too, but it is different. Going to church each week on Saturday (or Sunday) is an encouraging event for everyone. At least, it should be. As long as they (who are part of that empirical self of the world) participate in church in some way, they feel a real sense of security. They feel that they have done something well—perhaps on a superstitious basis—or, feeling that they really have pleased God by attending church.

Some church organizations even provide special drive-in arrangement for those who want to play golf or go to the beach on Sunday. They have a drive-

in church. And the church hopes that they will be able to serve those who are inclined not to attend a formal church in some way, with some instruction that will help them with their life so that their lives might be improved. I am not saying that a helpful sermon to those in that environment is of no value, because it is. Anyone being reminded not to kill or commit adultery, or to take care of Dad and Mom (to honor them), to not lie or steal—any reminder like that—is good for any citizen that hears it.

The difference between those called at this end time and those in the churches of the world today is that those in the world go through their church life—because of wrong doctrine and because of the fact that God has not specifically called them—never really knowing who God is, or who they are, or what God's plan is. So they just go through the motions. Most put in their time never really knowing why they were born—what future is in store for them. They just go through life thinking that they have an immortal soul and that, when they die, they are going to go to heaven and do something (although they are not sure what). Or, perhaps, they will even go to the other place; and they are not sure what is going to happen there either.

I want you to know that I am not ridiculing these people in any way, because it is by the grace of God that you and I sit here today. Also we have to recognize this—that some of the people in the world's churches do a better job of overcoming and growing than we do. They are far more dedicated to what they believe, even though they do not truly understand it.

The point is that unless we keep "who we are," what our future is, and why we were born in the forefront of our thinking—we too can fall into the habit of just *visiting church* each Sabbath. And, in doing so, *not* please God and very possibly miss out on the calling that we have been given. God has given us something very precious and very special, here at this time.

Yesterday, Richard did a beautiful job on Proverbs 29:18, so I will not do too much on this ("Importance of the True Gospel"); but "Where there is no vision, people cast off restraint." If we forget who we are, then we are going to begin to slack off, even though we may warm a physical seat in the church. Even though we cannot see immediately what is taking place around us in the world, or what God is doing specifically right now (other than scattering us), if we keep His law and keep that vision in mind, "happy is he"

(the individual that does that); because he is not going to lose out on his future.

Now, this year I have been blessed in the fact that I have have the opportunity to perform four weddings—three on the West Coast and one in Mt. Vernon, Missouri. Based on these statistics, anyone wishing to get married should move to the west, obviously. [Laughter.] You see it is obvious that the West Coast brethren have a greater desire to marry than those in the east. I understand it is something they put in the water out there. I really do not know. But I have been teased about marrying so many this year. In fact, I even got an e-mail addressed "Dear Marrying Sam." That was encouraging.

Although performing a wedding has to be one of the best jobs a minister can have, the counseling for marriage has to be one of the best reminders of who we are at this time. We all know that, in the future, we will be kings and priests. We all focus on this. And I am sure that some of you wives say, "I'm not sure *how* to be a king or a priest." But that will be worked out.

But what are we considered to be now, at this present time? What are we being prepared to become? What position must we assume first? This is the question for today. This is what the sermon is about. We all—both men and women, married or single—are in the position of being *made ready* to be the bride of Jesus Christ. That is where you are, right at this time. There is an event to come that we are all to be a part of.

Revelation 19:6-9 And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the voice of many waters and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, "Alleluia! For the Lord God omnipotent reigns! Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready." And to her was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. And he said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!'" And he said to me, "These are the true sayings of God."

All praise and thanksgiving is due to the Lord, because He has begun His reign. At last the wedding of the Lamb has come and *the bride has made herself ready*. You see, that is what our job is at this time. We know from Revelation 21:2-9, that the bride is New Jerusalem—which is a symbol of the church, the bride of Christ, who has been redeemed by her Husband-to-be. She has been given white linen (which is in sharp contrast to the purple that the harlots wear). She is special.

The linen clothing has two qualities about it: its brightness and its cleanness. And these reflect the qualities that the bride of Jesus Christ must have. Brightness depicts glorification; and cleanness reflects purity, loyalty, faithfulness, and the character of New Jerusalem—the bride of Jesus Christ. As it applies to us, it reflects the righteous acts of the saints; that is, your righteous acts as you prepare to be the bride of Jesus Christ.

That does not mean that there was any specific act performed to earn salvation. The bride is given her garments; but she has made herself ready for the wedding. By faithfulness and loyalty to her husband-to-be, she is preparing for the marriage that is to come.

The meaning of the wedding garment pictures repentance and the obedient response to Jesus Christ at this time now, prior to the wedding. And the bride prepares herself by obediently following her Husband-to-be in what He asks of her, prior to the marriage.

Now, we can consider the bride of Christ being collective, meaning the church. We have had discussion on who goes to the place of safety—that if you are just "in the church" you will go. No. You will go if God chooses you to go. That is His choice! So many feel that just being part of the church organization will entitle them to be part of the bride of Christ; but this does not make it personal, and it is not true. We have to consider that each of us *as individuals* are betrothed to Jesus Christ. It is an individual-basis thing. Though the church collectively is Christ's bride, the church is made up of those individuals who individually overcome. That is what we are to do.

Consider whom we are being married to. We hear these terms—"I'm going to marry Jesus Christ." "I'm going to be the bride of Christ." and things like

that—but consider how great is this Individual who has selected **us** to be His bride. (And I hope this is not tough on the men, to have to consider themselves to be the "bride" of Jesus Christ. If it is, it is too bad. You still have to put up with that. It is just how it is.)

What are His titles, that we might have a better understanding of His greatness and of the opportunity being afforded to us? He is the Creator. He is the Almighty, the mighty Prince. He is the Lord, our owner. He is the Master, Teacher. He is the Messiah, or the Anointed One. He is our provider, our healer, our banner, the one who sanctifies, our judge, our peace, our Lord of hosts, our righteousness, our shepherd. The One who has absolute power and authority. He is the one who is asking **you** to be His bride. The Son of God—showing the relationship with God the Father. The One who is heir to all things and vested in all power. The One who is the resurrection and the life. This is the One that you are being asked to marry.

He is the Son of Man—showing His connection with the earth, and us. He is the one who has humbled Himself (by death, on the cross) for the bride that He is going to take to Himself. He died for us and for all of mankind. This is the one who you and I are betrothed to. He is the greatest Being in the universe—second only to God the Father. Consider the future and the great benefits that are being offered to you, brethren, and to me in this calling that we have been given.

Now to understand the greatness of our calling, we must recall the condition that we were in when we were first considered to become the Israel of God—the church, or the bride of Christ. We (the Israel of old, and those of us today) were not anything to be proud of! In fact, we were the weak and we were the foolish, having no beauty at all to be admired. And yet, because of a great love that is humanly impossible to understand and grasp, we were selected to be *called and chosen* for this absolutely awesome position.

Please turn over to Ezekiel 16. This speaks of physical Israel by all means; but it relates to us as well, in the condition that we were called in.

Ezekiel 16:1-7 Again the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
"Son of man, cause Jerusalem to know her abominations [And he

starts out by telling Jerusalem, by telling Israel, and by telling us the condition that he found us in.], and say, 'Thus says the Lord G_{OD} to Jerusalem: "Your birth and your nativity are from the land of Canaan; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite. As for your nativity, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed in water to cleanse you; you were not rubbed with salt nor wrapped in swaddling cloths. [You did not even have any clothes on!]

No eye pitied you, to do any of these things for you, to have compassion on you; but you were thrown out into the open field, when you yourself were loathed on the day you were born. [Nobody wanted you, when you were born. You were nothing. You were garbage.] And when I passed by you, and saw you struggling in your own blood, I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' Yes, I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' I made you thrive like a plant in the field; and you grew, matured, and became very beautiful. Your breasts were formed, your hair grew, but you were naked and bare."

He says, "Look at the contrast. Look at the things I've done for you." Even in the church, look at the understanding we had, before we drifted away and began to be foolish.

Ezekiel 16:8-14 "When I passed by you and looked upon you, indeed your time was the time of love; so I spread My wings over you and covered your nakedness. Yes, I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you, and you became Mine," says the Lord God. Then I washed you with water; yes, I thoroughly washed off your blood, and I anointed you with oil. I clothed you in embroidered cloth and gave you sandals of badger skin; I clothed you with fine linen and covered you with silk.

I adorned you with ornaments, put bracelets upon your wrists, and a chain on your neck. And I put a jewel in your nose, earrings on your ears, and a beautiful crown on your head. Thus were you adorned with gold and silver, and your clothing was of fine linen, silk, and embroidered cloth. You ate pastry of fine flour, honey, and oil. You were exceedingly beautiful, and succeeded to royalty.

Your fame went out among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through My splendor, which I bestowed on you," says the Lord God.

But then, with all that wealth—as is so common—we began to think that *we* did it and to rely upon ourselves.

Ezekiel 16:15 "But you did trust in your own beauty, and played the harlot because of your fame, and you poured out your harlotry on everyone passing by who would have it."

Through Ezekiel, God goes on to say that His people played the harlot. They took the precious metals that God gave them and made images. They committed whoredoms with them and caused their children to pass through the fire. And today, we, of course—as the world—cause our children to be aborted. Millions of children are being aborted!

I have no understanding why nobody says, "Stop having premarital relations." But nobody ever does. Evidently they think that premarital relations are something that are perfectly all right. And yet look at all the grief (the A.I.D.S. and other sexually transmitted diseases) that result. Still, nobody says, "Stop having premarital sex." It just would not be done today.

So we kill our babies. And (in all that we have done) we have forgotten our weak, filthy, humble beginning. That is what God reminds them of, here in Ezekiel. We think that we have achieved all this success and prosperity because we are great. We do not really realize how blind and naked we are.

Ezekiel 16:32 [We too are. . .] "You are an adulterous wife, who takes strangers instead of her husband."

It continues by saying that, because of her whoredoms, she will be heavily corrected that she might cease playing the harlot. Then, after that, God's anger will be arrested—after the correction. Certainly this applies to the church today. As all of us understand, we had **all** let down in so many ways. And God, indeed, scattered us—which is right and good.

As Richard brought out yesterday, just as with Job, God gave Satan free sway to have at us. That was part of His plan—to see whether we are going to stand, to see if we are going to be His and grow up into the bride of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, where are we now? What is our responsibility toward God? Hopefully, we are close to the time when God is about to regather His people. Based on this, what is our responsibility at this time? In a very real sense, it is the same responsibility as that of a bride-to-be; and, that is, to consider her new life—what it will be like, and what will be required of her. (As Christ's bride-to-be, that is what we should be doing.) She is to consider her future husband's work, his nature, his way of thinking, his likes and dislikes—and then endeavor to fit into his life as a perfect companion to him in every way.

Genesis 2:18-19 And the LORD God said, "It is not good that man should be alone. I will make him a helper comparable to him." Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them. And whatever Adam called every living creature, that was its name.

People picture Adam as a primitive man; but here he named every beast in the world. There is not a scientist anywhere in the world that could do that today.

Genesis 2:20-24 So Adam gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper comparable to him. And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. Then the rib which the LORD God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man. And Adam said: "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother, be joined to his wife, and they shall be one flesh.

We have all read that many times. In all of this, consider that the bride of Jesus Christ is to be a true helpmeet to Him, just as the wives that God has given to us are to be helpmeets to us. This is what the bride of Christ has to look forward to—to be a helpmeet to her husband-to-be.

In all this, consider that this is an extremely important aspect of marriage, with a far-reaching purpose that God had in mind. I hope this helps all of us to take our marriages more seriously and to consider the roles that we have. They do picture the future event of the church marrying Jesus Christ. That is what your marriage pictures. That is why God put it here.

God knew that it was not good for man to be alone. And we can see from the plan of God that God does not wish to be alone. Nor does His Son wish to be alone. *You* are part of the plan of God. He has a great future planned for you as the bride of Jesus Christ, with much to do. As we heard about in the sermonette this morning, it is just going to be wonderful.

Adam needed a mate, one with whom he might take sweet counsel. Here is one of the things you will do with Jesus Christ as your husband. God further tells us that He would make a helpmeet for Adam, not only one who would be able to respond to his feelings, but also take an intelligent and appropriate part in his active pursuits. In all that Jesus Christ does, the bride will help Him in it.

Among the animals there was not a helpmeet found for Adam. None of the animals could be equal, a companion—a sharer of man's thoughts, his observations, his purposes, his enterprises. So God would have to make someone very special for Adam, just as God has to make somebody very special for His Son, Jesus Christ—and that is you.

God could have formed the woman out of the dust of the ground, as He did Adam. But the Creator's design was to give Adam a helpmeet that would be intimately close with him in every way and who would be, in every sense, a real part of him. When Adam first saw Eve, (I could never picture Adam saying what he did. I always thought the response would be, "Wow!" but)

Adam said, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh." A more proper translation might be: "This turn, or this one who passes in front of me, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." Adam recognized that.

We men have to understand that the creation of a helpmeet for man is one of the most wonderful gifts that God could ever give to us husbands. I kid you not! I hope nobody here ever says, except in the dearest and tenderest of feelings, "Well, that's the old lady." That is not "the old lady." That is somebody that God gave you that is very special for you. If you do not listen to her, men, you are lost.

We have to understand that the creation of a helpmeet for a man is indeed one of the most wonderful gifts God could give men. And we must understand that the bride that Jesus Christ is going to marry is going to be a wonderful gift for Him as well.

Proverbs 12:4 An excellent [virtuous in the KJV] wife is the crown of her husband, but she who causes shame is like rottenness in his bones.

The word "virtuous" means earnest of strength of character—rather than simple chastity. Not just that she is a virgin, but that she is filled with strength of character. One who is noble and courageous and dignified. One who is excellent morally—who strives for right morals. A helpmeet that is filled with energy and excitement at the role that she is to be given.

How many brides-to-be are excited about their marriage? After doing four weddings recently, I can tell you that they all were. It is just truly wonderful to watch them. They get all these butterflies and everything. It is just sort of neat.

The term "crown" here refers to the husband being joyful and filled with gladness because of the qualities that his bride possesses. And that is how Jesus Christ will be over His bride—filled with joy. Cloverdale (the commentator) said, "A steadfast woman is a crown unto her husband; but she that behaves herself dishonestly is corruption to his bones." Christ expects His bride to covet—to long for, to desire greatly—righteous character and to be honest with Him and with herself.

Proverbs 31:10-11 Who can find a virtuous wife? For her worth is far above rubies. The heart of her husband safely trusts her. . .

The bride of Jesus Christ will be totally trustworthy—able to be given anything and to be trusted with it.

Proverbs 31:11-13 . . . so that he will have no lack of gain. She does him good [Everything she does will be proper and good.] and not evil all the days of her life. She seeks wool and flax, and works willingly with her hands.

She is pleased with her job. She is excited about it; and she is going to do the best she can to fulfill her role and to honor her husband—to glorify him, in this case.

Proverbs 31:14-18 She is like the merchants ships, she brings her food from afar. She also rises while it is yet night, and provides food for her household [takes care of what she has been assigned to and what she has been given rule over], and a portion to her maidservants. She considers a field, and buys it; from her profits she plants a vineyard. She girds herself with strength, and strengthens her arms. She perceives that her merchandise is good, and her lamp does not go out by night.

She is diligent. She works hard. She is energetic for all of her husband's projects, and for the projects that she has been given to.

Proverbs 31:19-20 She stretches out her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle. She extends her hand to the poor [to take care of them, to be concerned and have empathy for them], yes, she reaches out her hands to the needy.

She is concerned and has love for all that are around her.

Proverbs 31:21-23 She is not afraid of the snow [or, difficulties] for her household, for all her household is clothed with scarlet. She

makes tapestry for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple. Her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land.

That is, he is known by [because of] his bride, by all that she does. He has a wonderful wife. Look at all that she has done for the neighbors and friends, and for the poor. Her husband is known because of all she does.

Proverbs 31:24-28 She makes linen garments, and sells them, and supplies sashes to the merchants. Strength and honor are her clothing [She is honorable, and she is strong in character.]; she shall rejoice in time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom [because she understands, in this case, God's ways and His way to live], and on her tongue is the law of kindness [and gentleness, and mercy, and consideration for all around her]. She watches over all the ways of her household [She is not negligent.], and does not eat the bread of idleness. [She is busy all the time. She is zealous for her role.] Her children arise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her [because of all she is].

And that is the type of a bride that we are going to be—to Jesus Christ.

Proverbs 31:29-31 "Many daughters have done well, but you excel them all." Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, but a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her own works praise her in the gates.

All throughout the majority of history, women have pretty much been considered as chattel and treated as property. In most cases, they have not been considered as valuable as they are.

I learned something from Jack Bulharowski. His wife, Bobbie, was sick a while back. Jack does not let on that he is concerned. But one day he told me, "You know, Bobbie is my right side." My wife is my right side too. I know that Jack would be lost without his wife; and I can understand that. We should all consider the helpmeet (that has been give to us) as our right side.

And, I am sure, on her better days my wife considers me her right side as well. (I do not know how you can put two "right sides" together; but, nevertheless, it works that way.)

A Proverbs 31 wife—a good wife, period—makes it possible for us husbands to work and earn a living, by watching over our home. They clean. They shop. They take care of the children. They make the home a place where it is pleasant to come home to. There is an old saying that *the man makes the living, and the wife makes it worthwhile*. That is the way it should be in the home.

On projects, the wife works side by side with their husbands, helping as a valuable partner. They offer him compassion, love, and tenderness. They soften him in some of the harsh judgments that he has to make. (My wife has softened me over the years.) She helps him to have a more gentle nature and, therefore, helps to round him out—because of their more gentle side. (Of course, we husbands help our wives to be stronger in certain areas, as well.) Wives encourage their husband when times are difficult. And they can be counted on to be faithful to him and the family, in serving them as well.

If wives feel loved and respected by their husband, they will not fear to offer correction when correction should come. A man who does not listen to that is foolish. That does not mean that he has to take it; but a man should always listen to the helpmeet (or, to the gift) that God has given him. Many times our wives have the opportunity to sit back, while we go straight forward from point A to point Z; and they say, "Well, have you considered this?" And many times their considerations are certainly worth listening to.

When the church marries Jesus Christ, it will be a helpmeet to Him in much the same way. It will oversee the cities and towns that He has given us. We will teach them, based on the way He wants them taught. We will be able to offer Him counsel in specific instances. He will be able to trust us completely in all that He has given us to do; and we will be a trusted, faithful, loved companion for Him—as we are not only His bride but also actual members of His Family. We will work side by side with Him to right the world, through the Millennium and through the White Throne Judgment.

That is the future you have. We will be a true and faithful helpmeet to Him in every sense of the word. We will be a tremendous value to Him, to God the Father, and to all the people that are left on the earth.

Now, what is required of us at this time? As the prospective bride of Jesus Christ, we have to seriously consider what our role is going to be and begin to conduct ourselves accordingly. Are we willing to give up the old life and start the new life? That is something that every bride has to ask herself.

In Genesis 24, Abraham's eldest servant had gone to find a wife for his master's son. I think that the question that is asked here is one that we have to ask ourselves. It was a miracle that he had found her, and now the moment of truth arrived. Would she leave the lifestyle that she was accustomed to and go forth to a new and different life? That is the question that is asked each one of you. Are *you* willing to leave the life that you came out of and go forth to the new life with your husband?

Genesis 24:58-59 Then they called Rebekah and said to her, "Will you go with this man?" And she said, "I will go." And they sent away Rebekah their sister, and her nurse, and Abraham's servant and his men.

She was going off to a new life. That is what we have been called to do, as well—as the perspective bride of Jesus Christ. Just as Rebekah had to leave her family, all she knew, and her way of doing things—so the bride-to-be of Jesus Christ is, in a sense, embarking into an unknown world. She has to change from what she was, to what she is going to become.

She is starting her own home. She is now responsible to her husband-to-be and his leadership. And she may have to move far away from her family, and friends, and the life that she knew before. As I stated before, when we talk of the church marrying Jesus Christ, we have to take this individually and personally—not collectively. I have to leave the life that I had before, the way of thinking that I had, the way of doing things that I used to do. And I have to start to think of the new life that I am going to be embarking. It is a personal thing (as a party of one) since we—as the one called—have to be willing to make the needed changes in our lives to qualify to be the bride of Christ.

It is our individual conversion that is important to God! It is those who hear God's voice and properly respond to it, that He will gather when He comes for His bride. What responsibility does that place on us, then?

Matthew 19:3-6 The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for just any reason? And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So then, they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."

The Pharisees were asking if it was lawful for a man to put away his wife, but Jesus did not respond to them in the way that they expected. His response was to show them the intent that God had for man and woman: that it was for them to become one flesh—not to be put away. It was not for them to be married for a while and then (because of the hardness of their hearts or their own selfish interests) to be separated from each other. God hates divorce.

I was having my teeth cleaned several weeks ago. I had all these instruments in my mouth. Of course, they always ask you a question then—just like waitress and waiters have been trained to wait until your mouth is full before they come to your table to ask how your meal is. Well, the dentist's hygienists do the same thing. So, I had all these things in my mouth; and she said, "Do you know what the new divorce statistics are?" (How long couples stay married?) I responded in a muffled way, "No, I don't know what they are." So then she told me that she had heard that the average marriage today lasts only four years. That is hard to believe. You see—God hates this. I do not know if that is exactly correct; but that is what she had heard on the radio anyway.

God expected His people to *work at* their marriages. That was the intent of marriage—to make them what they should be, because they picture the ultimate marriage of the church with Jesus Christ. God has a great purpose in this, just like the example that John Plunkett used this morning. (That was beautiful.)

A man is told to leave his father and mother and to cleave to his wife. The word "cleave" denotes a union of the tightest kind—much more intimate than with a mother, father, or child. It was originally taken from the term "gluing" and it means to adhere together so closely, so firmly that nothing can separate them. This is what the intent of marriage is.

The two shall be one flesh. That is, the two shall be *united as one*—in law, in feelings, in interest, and in deep affection. This does not mean that one cannot be interested in carpentry and the other enjoys gardening. But, when it comes to the overall purpose and goal in life, the husband and wife are to be united. They shall no longer have separate interests but shall act in all things as if they are one. This is the approach that we should take, considering our forthcoming wedding to Jesus Christ: that we are truly going to cleave to Jesus Christ and be completely **one** with Him.

He goes on to say "What God has joined together, let not man separate." When I read this verse, I always think of a third party coming into this marriage and wooing the husband (or the wife). We should never let any outside force separate us from our potential wedding with Jesus Christ.

But there is another aspect to this as well. Realizing that our marriages picture the future marriage with Christ, we (as individuals) should never do anything in the marriage to cause the marriage to break up. We should exhibit longsuffering at this time—in our marriages, which picture the future marriage. We should exhibit longsuffering with each other—coupled with humbleness, and kindness, and empathy, and faithfulness.

In Ephesians 5, does it not tell you to *submit to one another*? Of course, it does! But so many times we do not—and our marriages suffer. They do not picture the future marriage that is to come. No one in the marriage is to put his or her marriage asunder. This is a great responsibility that God places on each one of us.

I think that some time back Richard gave a sermon in which he brought out that the wife is judged, in great part, by her approach to marriage—by her responsibility in the office that she has been given as the wife. And the husband, I might add, is too. Are you the right kind of a spouse?

To not harm your marriage requires that you consider the handling of your physical substance. Do not put yourself in financial jeopardy, which puts a strain upon the marriage. It requires that you consider whom you associate with. Are they good or bad? Is the influence going to be harmful to your marriage? This also means that you have to be careful what you allow into your home—in the way of television, movies, alcohol, narcotics, smoking, or anything that would hurt the marriage. This requires loving, tender, solid leadership and cooperation—for the husband's part and how he governs the home, and for the wife's part and how she follows his leadership.

As it pertains to this sermon, we are to protect our own marriages now—that they might reflect the future marriage [to Jesus Christ]. But, whether we are married or single, we are to protect our minds from anything that would put asunder the marriage that is to come in the future. That is no small job in today's world, which is falling apart at the seams.

God holds the covenant that we made before Him in our marriages, individually, now as extremely important. Turn over to Malachi 2, please. The book of Malachi shows that God was displeased in four areas:

1. The priesthood was sacrificing the lame and the halt to God. They were sacrificing animals that even their governors would not take. These animals were diseased, with boils on them. Their fur was scabies, and everything else. They were a mess. So, they were offering sacrifices to God that even their governors would not accept.
2. They had gone back on the covenant that they had made with God. The covenant was not complicated. God had said, "If you will do this, I will do this for you. If you obey Me, I will bless you." It was just about that simple in the principle. But they had gone back on the covenant, and they chose not to obey God.
3. They were no longer giving correct offerings and tithing to God. They thought it too much trouble to serve God. God was just too much of a "trial" for them. They were really a pain to God, because He did not like it.

4. They were treating their wives treacherously by divorcing them and marrying women with strange gods. God was really offended at this.

Let us see what the book of Malachi says.

Malachi 2:11 Judah has dealt treacherously, and an abomination is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem, for Judah has profaned the Lord's holy institution which He loves: he has married the daughter of a foreign god.

Judah had profaned the holy institution of marriage, is what God's saying. He tells us here that He planned marriage as *a holy institution*. Israel was holy to God. God's laws were holy. Therefore the institution of marriage, and the purpose for which it was created, was holy as well. God wants us to understand this today.

Malachi 2:12 May the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob the man who does this, being awake and aware, yet who brings an offering to the Lord of hosts!

In the world today, marriage is treated as something that can be dissolved at will. I do not mean that there is not pain in marriage. I had a son that went through one, and a divorce. In tears he came to me (at 6' 5"); and he said, "Dad, I understand now why God hates divorce." It was sadness to him. That does not mean that there is not pain and suffering. To this world, it is no big thing to change partners; but to God it is a very big thing. We all know about what the divorce rates are today. But, in Malachi 2:12, God says it means so much to Him that He will cut off the man who does this—no matter what his position or rank.

Malachi 2:13 And this is the second thing you do: you cover the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping and crying; so He does not regard the offering anymore, nor receives it with goodwill from your hands.

What is being said here is: "Because of what you've done, your wives cover My altar with tears. At their divorce, what will they do? How will they live? They take this to My priests, who don't do anything about it." You see—God holds us special! He says, "I won't hear your prayers if you are having this kind of problem."

Malachi 2:14 Yet you say, "For what reason?" Because the LORD has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, with whom you have dealt treacherously; yet is she your companion and your wife by covenant.

You have made an agreement—a covenant with God—to take care of her, to honor her, to cherish her, and to provide for her. And so you say, "Why is the Lord angry with us?" Because the priests have been witness to the contract between the parties; and, when the lawless husband divorced the wife of his youth (his companion, and the wife of his covenant with God), you did not execute upon him the discipline of the law. You did not tell him he was wrong and show him what he was doing.

Malachi 2:15 (KJV) And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? that he might seek a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth.

The New International Version reads this way:

Malachi 2:15 (NIV) Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.

And then verse 16:

Malachi 2:16 (KJV) For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hates putting away: for one covers violence with his garment, saith the LORD of hosts: therefore take heed to your spirit, that you deal not treacherously.

Malachi 2:16 (NIV) "I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says the LORD Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith."

We can see from this, brethren, that God holds the institution of marriage to be of very great value! We should work to never let any anger, laziness, bitter habit, weakness that we possess, or anything else in this world separate us from the marriage that we have committed to. We should *work* to make the marriage work. And we should work to make our engagement to Jesus Christ work, as well. It is exceedingly important.

We can also see from this that God expects holy offspring. When we are married to Jesus Christ, will we produce holy offspring? You bet we will—through teaching, through encouraging, and through helping all those that are in the beginning of the Millennium (and all through it). We will help to give our Husband the holy offspring that He desires.

Now considering the importance of our role with Jesus Christ, is it any wonder that God is so careful in the selection of those that will make up the bride for His Son? God is exceedingly careful; and He is going to work with us to produce the best in us.

Romans 7:1-3 Or do you not know, brethren (for I speak to those who know the law), that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives? For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband lives, she marries another man, she will be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she has married another man.

Paul shows us here that as long as a person's husband lives, the wife is to remain true to her vows to God and to stay married to her husband. She is to come under his leadership in the home. And if, while he lives, she divorces him and marries another—then she is an adulteress. That is plain. But, if he dies, she is free from the law and is free to marry someone else.

Romans 7:4 Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you should be married to another—even to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God.

So we are dead to the Old Covenant; and here we are, under the New Covenant now. Because Jesus Christ died, we are dead to the law and separated from the first marriage and now eligible to marry the One who is raised from the dead—Jesus Christ, our future husband.

Romans 7:5 For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the law were at work in the members to bear fruit to death.

He said that "being dead to the law" does not mean that we do not have to obey it but that, at that time, we became guilty.

Romans 7:6 But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in newness of the Spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter.

For us, it means much more. Verse 6 states that now, because we are the betrothed bride of Jesus Christ, God expects more of us than ever before. In the past, His people had to live by the letter of the law; but now, with His sacrifice, we have to live by the spirit of the law. God expects much more of us. Now, instead of not killing, we are not to get angry. Now, instead of not committing adultery, we cannot look on a member of the opposite sex (man or woman) with a wrong thought. God the Father and Jesus Christ want His bride-to-be to be going on to perfection—to be overcoming these things. This is what it is all about!

We have the outline that God has given us to the end that we will have a happy marriage now and a marriage that will prepare us for the future marriage [with Christ Jesus].

Ephesians 5:21-22 Submitting to one another in the fear of God.
Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands, as to the Lord.

The word "submit" here does not mean to be a doormat. It means to submit that there will be order in the home—peace, harmony, order.

Ephesians 5:23 For the husband is head of the wife, even as Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body.

As the church acts under the authority of Jesus Christ, so the wife is to come under the authority of her husband.

Ephesians 5:24-25 Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.
Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for her.

How did Christ love the church? He laid His life down for it. That puts something really heavy on us, as husbands; and there is much more here than protection and support physically. Christ gave His life for the church—to save it. So also the husband should do everything that he can to help the wife and the children to be strong in God's ways, to encourage them, and to lift them up when they are down. He should positively teach his wife and his family, and encourage them in the things of God—that they might be given salvation. It is no small job for the husband. Not at all!

Ephesians 5:25-27 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her [that should be self-explanatory], that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.

That He might present her to Himself in the last day as His bride, in wonderful apparel—a church that is full of honor, faithfulness, love, splendor, and beauty—a bride not having any spot, defect, impurity, or wrinkle. That is, nothing that will deform, or disfigure, or offend. We are to become the perfect and beautiful bride of Jesus Christ. That is what God is after.

Ephesians 5:28 So husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself.

It is true. We all take care of ourselves physically. When we stub our toe, we would love to put it in our mouth (if we could reach it). The husband should have the same care for his wife too—when she stubs her toe. Yes, he should consider his own well being; but he should also consider her well being—both mentally and physically—and do all he can to take care of her, to love her, to cherish her, and to help her in her role as his wife.

Since he wants to be treated with kindness and mercy and patience, he should treat his wife in the same fashion. But, because we are in charge, we husbands tend to take that authority and sometimes (in fact, many times) not do that.

Ephesians 5:29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, even as the Lord does the church.

We should understand our wives hurts, and pains, and so forth. Jesus Christ understands ours, as well, and does everything He can to help.

Ephesians 5:30 For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones.

Jesus Christ is the Head of the church and the Savior of the Body. So we, being members of the church (and members of His Body), are so *united with Him* by one Spirit, in the closest relationship—similar to that of our arm being attached to our shoulder. That is how close we are. That is how close God wants us to be with each other in marriage.

Ephesians 5:31 "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.

That "the two shall become one flesh" is used to symbolize the closeness of the attachment that Jesus Christ feels towards His bride, and that His bride should feel towards Him.

Ephesians 5:32 This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church.

This is what marriage is all about. It is a mystery of far-reaching importance. It is a profound mystery. It is a secret revealed by Jesus Christ. It is the wonderful truth that Jesus Christ came to win His bride by giving His life for her.

The creation of Adam and Eve, and their being united, was done to point out the wonderful future and truth that Jesus Christ would marry His church. Therefore, based on the purpose of the institution of marriage, let every one of you love his wife as himself—because she, naturally and by divine ordinance, is a part of the man. She should respect and be obedient to her husband; and he should love her and take care of her—so as not to harm the order and the plan that God has set up. This is what our marriage should be like now, that it might be projected into the future.

Any couple counseling for marriage must consider the instructions to the Ephesians. We are to consider them too—as we are betrothed to Jesus Christ. We are to submit to our Husband that the order that God has set up might be followed. We are to be in subjection to our future Husband and His will for us. We are to be without complaining or trying to overthrow His decisions. We are to complement Him in all He asks us to do—in every way, with loyalty, and energy, and a positive attitude. And we (the church, the bride) are to deeply respect our Husband, holding Him in the absolute highest esteem.

When you hold a husband in the highest esteem, it is pretty hard for him not to try to live up to it. If you are constantly putting your spouse (husband or wife) down, it is hard for them to fulfill their role.

Where are we at this time, and what are we to do? August 1st, my wife and I flew out to Jefferson City to finalize Feast plans with the hotel. We had an interesting experience on the airplane. I sat next to a man from India. We chatted a while; and he started telling me about his religion—how wonderful it was. He told me all of its benefits. And he told me that Jesus Christ was the eighth prophet that his god sent to the earth. (I think there were supposed to be twelve.) He asked me if I would like a pamphlet on his religion.

Normally, I would say, "No, thank you. I don't think I'm interested at this time." However, this time I just said, "No." So things were very quiet for a while. Then he could not let it go; and he asked, "When is your God going to return?" And I said, "My God is going to return when there would be no flesh saved alive on the face of the earth if He didn't return." About that time, his eyes got sort of large. Then he said, "You know—your God is negative." I said, "Well, is there something negative about honoring your father and mother? Or, not killing? Or, not committing adultery? Or not lying, or stealing, or lusting?" He said, "No."

Then I said, "Have you ever considered what it would be like if just one commandment of our God was kept throughout the earth? How about you shall not kill? What would it be like if everybody kept that one commandment?" I could tell that he had never thought about that before. The more he thought about it, the more he pondered, "That would sure be something!" So I added, "And even the opposite from that, aside from not killing, that everyone would try to promote life." But he still would not let it go.

Then he asked the big question that was on his mind; and he said, "Aren't you supposed to be made in the image of your God?" He was referring to all of the killings that go on in America, and the rotten movies and television. By that question, he was saying, "Aren't you like your God, with all this perversion that is going on?" I said, "Yes, we are like God. God is doing things in two stages. It's a two-fold process. Man was created with the ability to create as God does. You and I are flying 35,000 feet above the earth in a creation of man." "Yes. Yes. Yes," he replied. "The Bible is God's handbook to the correct way of living," I said. And I asked him if his nation would not

be far better off, and without violence, if his people did what his religion said. "Oh, yes, they would be better," he responded.

I said, "So would our nation; but our nation doesn't have its mind opened yet." And then I told him that God at this time is revealing His mind to a special group of people, for the specific purpose of completing His creation of them in His image. That God is opening their mind to the truth; and that this Bible represents the truth of God. And that God is opening their minds to His truth that He might complete the creation in them—that they might make the changes in their lives based on that truth and become like Him in every way.

You see, brethren, that is *who* you are; and that is where we are now. As the future bride of Jesus Christ, we are the group whose minds have been opened to understand. And we are the bride who is to be—and that is expected to work to make herself—*ready*. What a wonderful privilege! Without a doubt, for those who have gone before us and those who are here now, we have been given absolutely the greatest opportunity ever offered to anyone. Because of this, we must remember *who we are*; and, because of that, God has every right to expect that we produce the very best results we can in this calling that we have been given.

In chapter two of the book of Hosea, there is a description of the terrible problems that Israel (and by extension, the church) has had to go through—and will have to go through. But at the end of those problems is the wonderful future that we can all be encouraged by. Basically, God is speaking through Hosea and He is saying: Say to your brethren, My people; and to your sisters, who have obtained mercy, "Plead with your mother [the church]; and convince her of her folly. And let her return to Him from whom she has revolted, lest I expose her in her infamy to punishment. I will take away your power to escape." She did not know that her blessings, and all that she had, came from God. So God said that He was going to have to take those blessings away. (If you wish, you can read this, up to verse 14.)

And He said, "I'll take these blessings away, that it might cause her to think. And all the joys of the feast will be taken away. (We have joy here today.) And I will visit her with a punishment for her worship of false gods."

Hosea 2:13 "I will punish her for the days of the Baals to which she burned incense. She decked herself with her earrings and jewelry, and went after her lovers; but Me she forgot," says the LORD.

But then, after the punishment. . .

Hosea 2:14 "Therefore, behold, I will allure her [This is what John was talking about—the time is coming when God will allure us.], will bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfort to her [to her heart]."

Once the repentance is there and the crimes and the offenses cease, God will cease the punishment and allure us to His heart.

Hosea 2:15-23 "I will give her her vineyards from there, and the Valley of Achor as a door of hope; and she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt. And it shall be, in that day," says the LORD, "that you shall call me 'My Husband,' and shall no longer call Me 'My Master,' for I will take from her mouth the name of the Baals, and they shall be remembered by their name no more.

In that day will I make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, and with the birds of the air, and with the creeping things of the ground. Bow and sword of battle I will shatter from the earth, to make them lie down safely. I will betroth you to Me forever; yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice, in lovingkindness and mercy; I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, and you shall know the LORD.

It shall come to pass in that day that I will answer," says the LORD; "I will answer the heavens, and they shall answer the earth. The earth shall answer with grain, and new wine, and with oil; and they shall answer Jezreel. Then I will sow her for Myself in the earth, and I will have mercy on her who had not obtained mercy; and I will say to those who were not My people, 'You are My people!' And they shall say, 'You are my God.'"

Though it may seem to be a time of confusion now, brethren, it is clear that it is *a time of testing* for us as well. Who will be faithful? Who will overcome? Will we truly not let down? Will we work at our calling with a true and faithful heart? From now until the return of Jesus Christ is our time to make ourselves ready as the bride of our soon-coming King.

So brethren, let us do all that we can to make this wonderful election (as the future bride of Jesus Christ) true in everything that we do—and truly work to overcome and glorify God.