

WEEK 13  
11.29.15

# THE MARRIAGE SUPPER OF THE LAMB



## FOCUS VERSES

### Revelation 22:17

And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.

### Matthew 25:10

And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut.

## LESSON TEXT

### Revelation 19:1–10

1 And after these things I heard a great voice of much people in heaven, saying, Alleluia; Salvation, and glory, and honour, and power, unto the Lord our God:

2 For true and righteous are his judgments: for he hath judged the great whore, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication, and hath avenged the blood of his servants at her hand.

3 And again they said, Alleluia. And her smoke rose up for ever and ever.

4 And the four and twenty elders and the four beasts fell down and worshipped God that sat on the throne, saying, Amen; Alleluia.

5 And a voice came out of the throne, saying, Praise our God, all ye his servants, and ye that fear him, both small and great.

6 And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.

7 Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready.

8 And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints.

9 And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And he saith unto me, These are the true sayings of God.

10 And I fell at his feet to worship him. And he said unto me, See thou do it not: I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren that have the testimony of Jesus: worship God: for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.



## FOCUS THOUGHT

Heaven will provide the ultimate time of celebration as the bride and bridegroom fulfill the eternal purpose of God.



# CULTURE CONNECTION

## God in America's Image

In a 2010 *USA Today* article, Cathy Lynn Grossman reported on the recent work of Baylor University sociologists Paul Froese and Christopher Bader. Analyzing thousands of national telephone surveys and over two hundred in-depth interviews, Froese and Bader discovered that while most Americans (around 90 percent) do affirm belief in God, many Americans had widely differing views of God's character and disposition toward humanity ("Americans' views of God shape attitudes on key issues," [www.usatoday30.usatoday.com](http://www.usatoday30.usatoday.com)).

In their book *America's Four Gods*, Froese and Bader catalog four prevalent American views of God:

- The Authoritative God who is actively engaged in history and punishes all those who do not fear Him. (28%)
- The Benevolent God who is actively engaged in the world but seeks to support us. (22%)
- The Critical God who carefully watches what transpires in this world but delivers judgment only in the next. (21%)
- The Distant God who created the universe and then left it to its own devices. (24%)

Most importantly, Froese and Bader connected these views of God to diverse opinions on current political and social issues.

Americans are still falling prey to the temptation of idolatry, creating God in their own image and after their likeness. More than ever, the church needs to proclaim the full revelation of God as found in the Bible!

## OUTLINE

### I. THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE A WEDDING FEAST

- A. Marriage of the King's Son
- B. The Ten Virgins
- C. Christ's Coming—a Time of Joy and Judgment

### II. THE FINAL FEASTS

- A. Revelation as "Canon Closing"
- B. Marriage Supper of the Lamb
- C. Judgment Supper of God

### III. CELEBRATING CHRIST AND THE CHURCH

- A. Christ as the Conquering King
- B. Christ as the Loving Bridegroom

## CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

No doubt most of us would look back on our wedding day as a highlight of our lives. It is easy to recall the beauty of our wife or the handsomeness of our husband on that special day! But as special as that day is in our memories, there is coming

a day even more impressive—the day we will be united with Christ forever at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb! The excitement that filled our hearts on our wedding day should pale in comparison with the emotions excited in us by the prospect of Christ's imminent claiming of His Bride, the church. Today's lesson seeks to point out both the beauty of the promise and the sobriety of its claims upon us.

## SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

### I. THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE A WEDDING FEAST

*"From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17).*

Immediately after Jesus' baptism and temptation, He embarked on His public ministry. According to the synoptic Gospels, Jesus, like His predecessor John the Baptist, gained His initial notoriety as a preacher with a unique

message. Matthew's Gospel shows a decided interest in Jesus' proclamation of the imminent in-breaking of eternity into our world; in fact, Matthew presents an entire chapter of Jesus' parables about this mysterious new Kingdom (Matthew 13). Two of the most important parables Jesus told about this coming Kingdom relate that event to two key aspects of Jewish wedding customs, the processional and the subsequent feast.

## A. Marriage of the King's Son

This parable is the third in a series that Jesus spoke to the key Jewish leaders after His triumphal entry (Matthew 21:1–11) and cleansing of the Temple (Matthew 21:12–14). R. T. France points out this parable series "speaks of people who do not live up to expectation and so lose their place of privilege, to be replaced by a more surprising group" (*New International Commentary on the New Testament*). Here, Jesus's teaching helped not only to silence His critics (Matthew 22:46) but also to seal His fate of crucifixion; He proved too dangerous to the established religious authorities to be allowed to live.

The setting of the parable was a prince's wedding feast. Relatively little is known about Jewish marriage customs, but the wedding feast was the concluding celebration of the marriage and lasted for seven days. (See Genesis 29:27.) According to Michael Sattlow, the focal point of the wedding feast was the recitation of the groom's blessing (*birkat atanim*), which "links marriage both [to] the primal marriage of Adam and Eve, and to the metaphor of the relationship between God, Israel, and Zion" (*Jewish Marriage in Antiquity*). Robert Mounce notes that "the figure of a marriage feast was widely used in ancient literature to portray the blessings of the life to come" as it does in Isaiah 25:6 (*New International Biblical Commentary*).

In this parable the king sent out his servants to notify those who had already been invited that the festal day had arrived. Thus the story assumed the invitees were not learning of this feast for the first time and had agreed beforehand to attend the feast. The invited guests' behavior, then, was utterly unexpected and insulting. This was not just any wedding celebration but the wedding of the

king's son! That they had agreed to come and then chose to reverse their commitment simply added fresh dishonor. Furthermore, the invitees ignored the king's feast in favor of attending to mundane matters of business; they were not "begging off" at the last minute due to some unforeseen crisis.

Even so, the wrath of the king in launching a military strike and destroying their city (would that not have been the king's own city?) seems drastic. Of course, when one considers that within little more than a generation the city of Jerusalem would be destroyed by the Roman general Titus (AD 70), Jesus' description here was prophetic rather than hyperbolic.

As in the parable of the vineyard, which directly preceded this parable (Matthew 21:33–44), Jesus effectively recited the history of Israel's continual rebellion against the call to covenant. Matthew commented at the end of the vineyard parable that Jesus' hearers "perceived that he spake of them" (Matthew 21:45). Thus, when the king in the parable of the marriage sent more servants out to invite new guests to the marriage supper, Jesus was still speaking prophetically of Gentile inclusion in the Kingdom in the face of Israelite rejection of the Messiah.

At a crucial point in the Book of Romans, Paul turned to this puzzling relationship between Gentile inclusion and apparent Jewish exclusion:

*"What then? Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded (According as it is written, God hath given them the spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear;) unto this day. . . . I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy" (Romans 11:7–8, 11).*

Paul saw God's turning to the Gentiles as part of His long-term plan to save the chosen people by provoking them to jealousy. But in Jesus's parable, being a newly invited guest was in itself no guarantee of safety. Jesus told of a guest who showed up without a proper wedding garment; R. T. France thinks this

does not designate a particular kind or style of clothing but rather the simple expectation that one would wear one's "best" clothes and be clean and neat in appearance (*New International Commentary on the New Testament*). In a sense, by showing up without taking the time to bathe and put on clean clothes, this guest was behaving with as much disrespect for the king and the occasion as the first guests who refused to attend! This guest also found himself facing the king's judgment.

The application is clear: Even we who are privileged to be a part of the New Testament church are still called to keep ourselves "unspotted from the world" (James 1:27). We know the character of God is both the source and the goal of holiness. (See Leviticus 19:2). Failure to live out the call to holiness will result in our being "cast out," losing our place in the coming Kingdom. Those invited to the Kingdom and the chosen who will actually be in the Kingdom are not identical categories. Let us strive always to live out the call to holiness that is laid upon us!

## B. The Ten Virgins

Later in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus told another parable about a wedding. Like the Matthew 22 parable, this story appears as part of a series of parables related to the unexpected nature of the coming of the Lord and His Kingdom. However, this time the focal point is the processional that precedes the wedding feast rather than the feast itself. The custom, it seems, was for the bride and groom to begin the processional from separate locations with more and more family and friends joining along the way; these processions would meet at some pre-determined common point and then proceed together to the wedding feast. Typically, the groom and the bride would each wear a garland for a crown, and the bride would be borne on a litter (Michael Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity*).

It seems safe, then, to say that both the wise and the foolish virgins in Matthew 25 were related to the bridegroom and were waiting to join in his procession. It is important to remember that, according to Jesus, both the wise and the foolish virgins were initially prepared for the bridegroom's arrival and neither group was expecting the bridegroom to be so

long delayed. In fact, both the wise and the foolish fell asleep and were surprised by the announcement of the bridegroom's coming.

The foolishness of the five virgins was found not in their falling asleep or in their surprise at the announcement of the bridegroom's coming. Rather, their foolishness was found in their lack of forethought in not bringing extra oil in case of a delay. There has been much speculation about the wise virgins' apparent selfishness in not sharing their oil; however, the point of Jesus' parable seems to be that the wise could not share their oil with the foolish for fear that their own torches would burn out and the entire procession would be left wandering in the darkness!

This lack of foresight proved to be more than just an inconvenience; between the time the virgins awoke to light their lamps and the foolish went to purchase the necessary oil, the bridegroom's procession passed by, was joined by the five wise virgins, and proceeded to the wedding feast where "the door was shut" (Matthew 25:10). When the foolish virgins finally arrived at the wedding feast already in progress, they were curtly dismissed with the words, "I know you not" (Matthew 25:12).

Obviously, Jesus was not implying the bridegroom had suddenly forgotten his friends and family not present at the wedding feast. France is assuredly right that this is "more a formula of dissociation than a literal statement of nonacquaintance" (*New International Commentary on the New Testament*). It represents a statement of judgment on the foolish virgins' lack of watchfulness and preparedness.

However, it seems vital to recognize the echoes of the last segment of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. First, Jesus ended that sermon with a parable contrasting a wise and a foolish builder; here, a similar contrast was made between the wise and the foolish virgins. Just as the wise builder was saved from the storm by his attention to the "rock" of Jesus' teachings, so also were the wise virgins saved by their attention to bringing along the necessities. Both parables promote the importance of sound judgment and proper preparation. Second, Jesus spoke in the Sermon on the Mount of those who will say to Him on the day of judgment, "Lord, Lord," who will be told to

depart for the Lord “never knew” them (Matthew 7:22–23).

### C. Christ’s Coming—a Time of Joy and Judgment

The unique feature of these two important parables is the way in which they take a common image of joy, a wedding celebration, and turn it into a warning about impending judgment. Each of these stories ended with groups who should have been included in the celebratory wedding feast being excluded because of their own foolish rebellion.

It is easy to think either joyously or soberly about the second coming of Christ, but difficult to remember it is simultaneously and equally both. For many individuals, the Second Coming represents their escape from the cares and trials of this life, and they look forward to it with great anticipation and excitement. For many others, however, the Second Coming represents the time when God will come to take vengeance on all evildoers, and they look forward to God’s justice finally being meted out against this world’s wickedness. For still others, the Second Coming represents the time when God will judge whether their preparation is adequate, and they find the thought of Christ’s return a sobering, if not a dreadful, consideration.

The truth is that Christ’s return represents all three of these realities, and the call to “love his appearing” (II Timothy 4:8) is fulfilled only when we keep all aspects of His promised return before us. The promise of the Second Coming calls us both to rejoice and to repent. It calls us both to persist in faithfulness and to cease from all activity that does not honor God.

## II. THE FINAL FEASTS

### A. Revelation as “Canon Closing”

The arrangement of the books of the Bible, their “canonical order,” is vital to our understanding of their purpose and an important aid to our proper interpretation. It is no accident, for example, that Matthew’s Gospel, which opens the New Testament canon, has as its first record of Jesus’s teaching the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus presented new interpretations of commandments from the law of Moses, the “opening” of the Old Testament

canon. It effectively presents Jesus as a “new Moses” who fulfills the original intent of God. (See Matthew 5:17).

In that same sense, the Book of Revelation serves as the “canon closing.” Robert Wall, whose groundbreaking work on Revelation argued for just such a perspective, said: “The NT canon in its final form is the product of an intentioned process. In this sense, neither the inclusion of Revelation within the NT canon nor its location within the NT canon is the result of arbitrary and abstract decisions made by a few . . . the church has given added significance to Revelation by positioning it last in the biblical canon; in my view, Revelation is the Bible’s ‘conclusion’ and should be interpreted as such” (*New International Biblical Commentary*).

Thus John’s warning about adding to or taking away from the words of “this book” (Revelation 22:18–19) is simultaneously speaking about the Book of Revelation, the New Testament, and the entire Bible. This canonical focus helps to highlight the allusions made throughout Revelation to various other parts of Scripture; the final scenes depicted there bring to a dramatic conclusion all the various threads of scriptural teaching and imagery.

It is well beyond the scope of this lesson to catalog all those various “canon-ending” features of Revelation, but in the context of the present lesson series, one particular thread must be traced. Prior lessons have focused on the Jewish festal calendar and demonstrated that it ranged from solemnity, even outright grieving, to celebration. Every human emotion finds some form of festal expression within the Jewish religious year described in Scripture.

In the latter part of Revelation, an angel told John, “Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb” (Revelation 19:9). All the feasts and festivals described throughout the Old Testament and all the parables Jesus told about the heavenly wedding feast that awaits the saints of God find their ultimate fulfillment and meaning in the event described at the conclusion of the canon.

### B. Marriage Supper of the Lamb

The setting for the celebration of the heavenly marriage supper is the destruction of Babylon, the city whose streets had run with the blood of saints and prophets. (See Revelation 18:24.)

The destruction of the city is meant to symbolize the defeat of the Antichrist and his world government. While it brings great mourning to the kings and merchants, the announcement of her destruction is a moment of great relief to the persecuted people of God who are called to worship the One who alone is able to destroy Babylon. (See Revelation 19:5.)

That the culmination of history is announced as a marriage celebration is significant because of the many times the Old Testament prophets pictured Israel's relationship to God as a failed marriage, perhaps no more poignantly than in the book of Hosea:

*"Plead with your mother, plead: for she is not my wife, neither am I her husband: let her therefore put away her whoredoms out of her sight, and her adulteries from between her breasts; lest I strip her naked, and set her as in the day that she was born, and make her as a wilderness, and set her like a dry land, and slay her with thirst. And I will not have mercy upon her children; for they be the children of whoredoms. For their mother hath played the harlot: she that conceived them hath done shamefully: for she said, I will go after my lovers, that give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, mine oil and my drink" (Hosea 2:2-5).*

In Revelation 19, the wedding that had been put off for millennia by human rebellion and faithlessness will now take place. The date has been set; the caterer has been paid; the photographer has been booked, so to speak—all the necessary arrangements are complete and God's plan will finally be fulfilled. This will be the feast to end all feasts; this will be the celebration to outdo all other celebrations. It will be that glorious moment when all the pain and sacrifice we have endured will be swallowed up in the glory of the full revelation of Jesus Christ. When John said God will "wipe away all tears from their eyes" (Revelation 21:4), he meant the beauty of Heaven will be more than enough to pay for all the pain of Earth!

### C. Judgment Supper of God

However, that is not the only festive image given in Revelation 19. After witnessing the

beauty of the revelation of the bride of Christ, John heard another angel cry out, issuing an invitation to a very different sort of feast. This angel called the birds of the air and the beasts of the field to gather to feast on the flesh of the Lord's enemies! This is not the Marriage Supper of the Lamb but the "supper of the great God" (Revelation 19:17).

The juxtaposition is meant to be jarring. We have gone from images of unimaginable beauty and grandeur to the grisly prospect of corpses rotting in the desert sun, being gnawed apart by all manner of wild beasts. To die unburied and have one's body eaten by ravenous beasts was the most shameful death imaginable in the Old Testament, which is why Rizpah, for example, fought so long to keep the birds and beasts from attacking her dead sons' bodies (II Samuel 21:10).

Within this juxtaposition is the haunting message that we will end up at either one or the other of those great final feasts. If we refuse as the foolish guests in Jesus' parable to accept the invitation to the marriage supper, we will end up on the menu at the judgment supper! In graphic visuals, John set before us the same challenge presented by Moses to the people of Israel millennia before: "I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

## III. CELEBRATING CHRIST AND THE CHURCH

While the parables of the wedding feast in Matthew's Gospel focused on the response of those invited, John turned the focus of the celebration from the guests to the Bridegroom and the Bride. John presented two important images of Christ that reveal both His and our identities.

### A. Christ as the Conquering King

In Revelation 19:11, John received a vision of "a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war." It has often been noted that in Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, His choice to ride on a donkey indicated He came peacefully. However, in Revelation 19 John saw Jesus riding

on a horse leading an army. While Jesus' first coming as the Babe in the manger was for our peace and salvation, when He comes again it will be with judgment and justice. He will return in the power of His resurrected glory.

So many today want to reject this image of Jesus. They want a Jesus who is the "friend of . . . sinners" (Matthew 11:19), but not a Jesus who is the "Judge of all the earth" (Genesis 18:25). They want a Jesus who brings mercy but not punishment. However, the church's hope lives only if we believe that one day wrongs will be righted, justice will be executed, and truth will prevail. The justice of God, as much as His mercy, is our hope of victory.



*(Susan's conversation with Mr. Beaver about Aslan the Lion.)*

**"Aslan is a lion—the Lion, the Great Lion."**

**"Ooh," said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he . . . quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."**

**"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you" (C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*).**

## **B. Christ as the Loving Bridegroom**

Christ, Revelation 19 says, will return for two purposes: to conquer evil and to claim His bride, the church! The majesty of Christ's appearing is designed not simply to strike fear in the hearts of His enemies but to reveal His

love for the church and, in turn, to awaken our love for Him. Men particularly struggle, it seems, with the metaphor of the church as the "bride of Christ." However, if we understand that marriage—even human marriage—is a kind of covenant relationship, then it becomes easy to understand that to call the church Christ's "bride" is simply another way of saying we are in a covenant relationship with Him.

What makes this so important is that the covenant relationship is built on an ongoing mutual commitment and sharing. Whereas contracts are of limited duration and for a specified purpose, a covenant lasts as long as both parties live and broadly includes all significant areas of life. A covenant is a binding vow to do all within one's power to aid and support another.

That Christ is our Bridegroom indicates, through Calvary, He has made just such a promise to us. He is our source of supply. That is why Peter wrote triumphantly: "According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness" (1 Peter 1:3).

## **INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE**

As we think back on all the various feasts of Israel and their meaning and application for us today, let us also remember to look forward to that final feast that is yet ahead—the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. On that day, Christ and His church will be revealed in all of their majesty and splendor. And may that vision of what is to come serve both as our warning and our hope. May we hear today a call to renewed faith and to renewed faithfulness. For one day soon, we will see God's purposes fulfilled in this world! ■

## **REFLECTIONS**

- Think back to your wedding day (or that of a close friend or relative). What key emotions do you remember? Fear? Excitement? Frustration? Why do you think weddings are such emotional events? Is that good or bad? Why?
- Why do you think the Bible so often compares our relationship with God to a marriage? In what ways is it similar? What are the important differences?
- Is it really possible to truly love God if we don't fear Him? How do you see those two ideas relating in your own walk with God? How could you help a non-believer understand the difference but maintain the connection between them?