

The way that **April** accepted my proposal to marry her is somewhat unusual. I proposed to her right before I was to leave Texas to go to Florida for a job interview. April wanted to pray about it, to get a sense of direction from the Lord. I told her that I was already certain, so take all the time she needed. When I arrived at my hotel room after the first day of interviews, the red light on the phone was blinking indicating I had a message. I listened to the message where April told me she had already bought a dress and had reserved the church for June 5<sup>th</sup>.

I really had very little to do with the next few months of intense preparation, for I was already working (and April would add surfing) in Florida.

I do know, however that preparing for a wedding requires shifting around many priorities.... and that the LABOR involved is fueled by ever increasing **anticipation** of that DAY.

I want to present to you that whether you are currently married or single.....that if (by faith in the gospel) you are part of the **Bride** of Jesus Christ..... then the rest of your life should be spent....

### **Preparing for the Wedding**

The NT is permeated with the depiction of the church as the **wife** of the Lamb..... All of Christian history seems to point towards His Wedding Feast.... the unimaginably glorious **celebration** of our long awaited face to face communion with the Bridegroom....

Interestingly though, (in chronological terms)... it was not the mouth of Jesus (in the NT) that FIRST depicts the church as the Bride of Christ.... but it was His forerunner... John the Baptist....

#### **John 3:22-36**

" After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and **people were coming** and being baptized (for John had not yet been put in prison). Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over **purification**. 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.**"

John answered, "A person cannot receive even **one** thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' 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**. He must increase, but I must decrease."

All of the events we have studied thus far in the gospel of John took place in the region of **Judea**.... (region around the Jordan river and down towards Jerusalem)..

All of these conversations and events took place **BEFORE** any of the events that are recorded in the other 3 gospels.....

We know that because **that** is the purpose of the **anecdotal** reference John includes there in 3:24... “John had not yet been put in prison...”. The synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark & Luke) all begin to record Jesus’ ministry as beginning **after** John is taken out of the way....and Jesus is already moved up into Galilee...

Here in Jn. 3... we find Jesus and JTB ministering **concurrently**.....

We have already learned that John the Baptist was calling Jews to **repent** of their trust in themselves... or in their **ethnicity**... or in their religious performance.... and trust in the **Lamb of God** who was coming to take away the sins of the world....

The way they **SHOWED** they believed ....was by being baptized... **Now** Jesus was preaching that same message... but instead of pointing them to One who was coming (like John) He pointed them instead to a personal relationship with **Himself**.

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People **kept on** coming.... expressing faith in Christ.... saying that they wanted to be included in this New Covenant People – the church...

Even though it had not yet been fully revealed (like **we** have it in the NT).... They knew they wanted to follow Jesus.....

They wanted to become part of .... the **Bride** of Christ.

Just like a wedding ceremony publicly celebrates and declares the **inner union** and heart level commitment that an engaged couple has already made in private.....

Baptism is designed to be a public ceremony of declaration....a “putting on the **wedding dress**” (if you will) of the Christian faith.

Preparing for the Wedding

#### 1. Put on the Dress

In a culture like ours.... I probably need to make it clear that I am not suggesting **cross dressing** for men here..... I am making an analogy of the intentionality of a Bride to

be.....who puts on her wedding gown.... as a means of **presenting herself** to her husband...

If you say you believe the gospel..... you need to be willing to be publicly identified with Him as part of His Bride... baptism is the **initial** means the Bible prescribes for doing that.

- But you see the problem don't you?

A wedding gown is white....because it symbolizes (ideally) the **purity** of a bride who has been **waiting** for her husband all of her life. She has made preparations to be adorned as beautifully as she possibly can, in order to be presented to him as his own before God, so that they can enter into a lifetime of communing together as one.

**How on earth** can people like you and I..... whose garments are **stained** with **sin**..... possibly be clothed in anything pure that is seen as beautiful before Jesus?

Doesn't Scripture say that even what we think of as good works..... are like filthy rags before God (because He is so pure and holy)?

The answer is .... because we fall short of His standard...and can do nothing to **launder** our lives... and make them white....

God **GIVES** those who believe in His Son.... the **perfect garment** of righteousness in Jesus Christ. The beautiful gown of His holiness is imparted to **clothe** our souls with salvation.... so that we will stand before God (on the wedding day – holy, blameless and beyond reproach)... if we continue to trust in the gospel.

Here is one prophetic picture of that spiritual change of clothes pictured in the OT:

### **Zechariah 3:3-5**

"Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments. And the angel said to those who were standing before him, "Remove the filthy garments from him." And to him he said, "Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with **pure vestments**." And I said, "Let them put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments. And the angel of the LORD was standing by."

Baptism is the **OUTWARD**, visible public expression that you believe **THIS** reality has occurred in your life..... through the gift of the gospel.

We are planning to have a baptism service on 1/1 right here.

If you believe the gospel.....that Jesus died on the cross for your sin..... (that His death fully paid the debt you owe as a transgressor)....and that His resurrection is proof that you have eternal life in His Name.....

but you have not yet been baptized.... Please come and talk to us today.....

Preparing for the Wedding

1. Put on the Dress

2. Point to the Groom Alone

Understandably, the Bride garners the most attention at a normal wedding. She is the **prize**.... she is one everyone adores.....

But in the spiritual wedding we are preparing for..... it is the Bride**GROOM** (the husband) who deserves ALL our **attention** and affection.

JTB would have been very familiar with the OT passages which compare God's relationship with His people to the intimacy of the covenant relationship between a husband and his wife:

**Hosea 2:16-17; 19-20**

"“And in that day, declares the LORD, you will call me ‘My Husband,’ and no longer will you call me ‘My Baal.’ **19** And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall **know** the LORD.”

God SAVES His people from pointing to other things.....from worshipping other things...in order for our heart to be wedded exclusively to HIM. So that (as a church) we can collectively POINT to Jesus as the ONE worthy of worship.....

But in day to day life..... is **HE** actually the One who gets most of your attention?.....

- Is your mind not naturally geared to garnering the attention and affection for YOURSELF?

This struggle even occurs in **ministry** contexts..... people might not be willing to admit it.... but if the truth about our hearts could be seen..... the reality is that we often prefer for the spotlight to be **pointing to** US instead of the BrideGROOM....

Look at how that happened to John's disciples:

**John 3:25**

"Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over **purification**.

How heated this discussion was we do not know.... but it was a dispute over the difference between all the various Jewish cleansing rituals and the baptism that John's disciples were performing. Historians tell us that by that time.... some Jewish sects in that day were taking ceremonial baths each day for that purpose...

For whatever reason.... in the midst of this dispute.... the Jew must have informed John's disciples of how **irrelevant** their ministry was now anyway.....compared to the **rising star** a few miles up river.....

In fact, 4:1 tells us plainly that Jesus' ministry quickly **eclipsed** John's in that region...

The fact that they were no longer the main attraction greatly bothered John's disciples... listen to the **angst** in their voice.....

### **John 3:26**

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."

John – did you know that the One you yourself baptized .....is now HIMSELF having a ministry of baptizing.....and EVERYONE is going to **HIS** church now!

- Think that could ever happen to you and I? Maybe even without us realizing it?

That as the **glory** of JESUS begins to burn in the hearts and eyes of His people.... and our service to him is no longer in the spotlight..... that we could become **ENVOIOUS** of the attention **others** are getting....

Whether the others... be other churches.... or even other individuals within this church...

Could our hearts be so deceitful..... that we would actually prefer the GLORY to come to **us**?

Even if we KNOW that the glory rightly belongs to **Jesus**?

Sadly,.... **yes**.

- **ENVY**... (even spiritual envy).... is the ENEMY of glory...

Let us learn to identify it and crucify it in our minds... before it ever begins to take root in our hearts.....

Here's why:

It is one of the most contagious and damaging forms of idolatry in the church. It promotes **SELF** at the expense of destroying the harmony through which we join our gifts together to POINT to the glory of Christ.

Calvin took particular interest in applying this text to Pastors....he said that ministers who draw away the bride of Christ after themselves are guilty of treating the wife of the lamb like a **prostitute for their pride**.

Look how John **corrected** his disciples:

**John 3:27**

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

Each person has his own God given **station** in redemptive history..... (each one has an appointed role to play.....**especially** the Son of Man....

John is saying to his disciples:....this ministry you are witnessing (of people flocking to Jesus) is not an honor He has taken upon **Himself**....(so that you should think of him as trying to take something that is **ours**...)

He has been sent from Heaven for this very purpose..... This ROLE has been **GIVEN** to Him by God.

God has likewise STATIONED you in a particular place... at this particular time....

If you and I are joined to Christ (by faith).... God has and is imparting GIFTS **through Him** to us.....

**Every ability** (both natural and spiritual) that you have.....only comes from one place...**heaven**. ..GOD gifts you with capacities and talents and spiritual gifts.... in order that all of them might be joined together with others in the church .....

- So that the BRIDE can (in one harmonious voice).... **POINT** to the GROOM.

Not sure if you have noticed.....But that **doesn't always happen** in church.

In fact, apart from the work of God's Spirit among us ... our default position is to be **puffed up** ... comparing ourselves to one another.....

Paul admonished the Corinthians about this same issue:

**1 Corinthians 4:7b**

..."What **do you** have that you did not receive?

Go ahead... name it.... what **DO you have**?

..... intellect? business acumen? physical health or strength? wisdom?  
money? social abilities?

an ability to teach? do you have the gift of mercy?.....

**ALL** of it is a gift from God.

**4:7c** “If then you **received** it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?”

**Beware**... of every attempt... in your own mind... (ever so subtle) to credit yourself with some accomplishment....

John wanted to correct his disciples’ **QUEST** for **attention** by teaching them Who it was that **he** desired to **POINT** to.....

**John 3:28-29a**

"You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am **not** the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom.

At the beginning of most traditional weddings.... the groom is virtually indistinguishable from his groomsmen..... other than the fact that he is standing closest to the preacher.....

But **after** the wedding..... there is no mistaking which one he is.....

He is the one who **HAS the Bride** on his arm..... He is the one who is leading this one who has just been entrusted to him.....up the aisle or out the door..... laughing and joyous.....and we enter into their joy by throwing stuff at them.....

John says.... the one who has the Bride.....**is** the Bridegroom..... the one to whom the sheep **FLOCK**.... He is their shepherd....

Jesus later said.....

**John 10:27** "**My** sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they **follow me**."

Day by day.... we prepare for the Wedding.... by learning to increasingly hear the voice of our Savior....and **POINT to** His goodness and grace...

This is a **process** of learning to LOVE His glory.... learning to **POINT** all praise to Him.....

That won’t happen unless you are learning to LOVE hearing His voice:

**John 3:29b**

"... 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."

In Judean weddings, the **best man** (or friend of the groom as he is called here) was not just there to hand him the ring (like in our weddings)...

He actually planned, coordinated and presided over the ceremony. He organized all the details of the event....AND it was he who actually **presented** the Bride to the GROOM....

So he took SPECIAL pleasure in watching the two united in wedlock....

In seeing the GROOM honored by the Bride....

Now that repentant sinners were flocking to JESUS..... the BRIDE was being joined to their GROOM.

**Sheep** were finding their Shepherd!

The hearts of the disobedient were turning to the RIGHTEOUS One....in saving faith!

His JOY was now COMPLETE!

He had eaten locusts and wild honey..... he had endured the scorn of the Pharisees..... and he was soon to be beheaded for Speaking the Truth to King Herod about his adultery....

But it DIDN'T MATTER! The Mission of His life had been accomplished!

### 3 John 4

"I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth."

Nothing wrong with applying that to your physical offspring.....that is certainly any godly parent's prayer....

But make sure you understand that in the NT... both Paul and John use "their **children**" to refer to **believers** whom they have pointed to Christ..... who they have nurtured in the faith....whom they have invested in and taught the Word of God.

JTB's JOY was made **full**..... as other sinners were united with their Savior!

- Have you experienced that particular **JOY** of pointing people to Jesus and them actually becoming **WED** to Him by faith...?

it will SATISFY your heart much more deeply that your team winning the big game....

Or than your investment portfolio doing well.....

JTB here gives us the prescription..... a one sentence formula if you will for MAXIMIZING our JOY in Jesus....as a **LIFESTYLE**.... not just an occasional experience....

This is the **goal** of the Christian life:

### John 3:30

"He must increase, but I must decrease."

MORE.... MORE about Jesus..... LESS and LESS about **me**....

Shine BRIGHTER Lord...on center stage..... let me be your **stagehand**.... who disappears in your **shadow**.....

While the whole world.....was seeking to make themselves great.....seeking honor among men..... John **delighted** to FADE into the background.....

So that he would not obscure in any way..... the GLORY of the KING.....

That is our job description as well....

The ongoing way that we can Prepare for the Wedding.....

### 3. Practice Self-Demotion

We don't naturally do that..... it is a work of grace alone....

The natural pattern would be to seek self-**PRO**MOTION.....

To climb the ladder in every sphere of life.....

But as we often teach..... the economy of the KINGDOM is **backwards** from the world.

Look at how Jesus contrasts the **proud** religious leaders of Israel .....with the INSTRUCTIONS he gives to the leaders of His church...

#### **Matthew 23:5-12**

"They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

This is the essence of the FIRST shall be LAST..... and the LAST first.....

It is an honest mistake..... when we try to import the mindset of the world into the church..... sincere, well meaning people do it.....

Remember Martha.... how she complained to Jesus that she was wearing herself out in the kitchen... and all Mary wanted to do was delight in Jesus.....

Jesus told her..... Martha..... only ONE thing is necessary.....

He who humbles himself at the feet of JESUS.... delighting in His glory.... will be exalted....

- How do we DO that? It rubs against every fiber of our flesh.....

You do it by the same means JTB had done it his whole life.....

By intentionally DELIGHTING in the VOICE of the LORD .....

The voice of the Lord in the **OT**... is always associated with the Word of God and the necessity of our obeying Him if we are going to enjoy His blessings....

as you seek to have the Word of God dwell in you richly..... by choosing to submit yourself to what Jesus says....

..... you will SEE the glory of JESUS begin to shine brighter and brighter in your HEART....

## **2 Peter 1:19**

"And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and **the morning star rises** in your hearts,"

Prayerfully..... DEMOTE yourself..... to sit as JESUS's feet.... give **attention** to His Voice.... as you hear and read His Word.....in reverent delight.....

His Holy Spirit will INCREASE the Light of Glory in your heart....

Like the **Sun** increases to send its rays across the dark landscape each morning.....

It is in this way.... that we as the Bride of Christ..... **prepare** for the wedding...

it is through **these means** that our JOY can be COMPLETE.....

And the mission which God has given us to do.... can be **accomplished**.....

For the glory of the GROOM.