

1.

THE LOVE OF GOD

Why did God create man? This is an important question which needs to be answered by those seeking to understand their Creator and their relationship to Him. The responses most often given usually include such thoughts as: "Man was created for God's glory" or "Man was made to worship and glorify God." While such explanations certainly contain truth, they fall quite short of really pinpointing God's ultimate design. They fail to penetrate the depths of Biblical revelation and to provide a framework which is meaningful to us individually. Such answers tend to convey a general, impersonal impression concerning God's intentions for man. But I believe that the God whom the scriptures reveal has in His heart a plan of far more intimate, personal relevance than most of us have ever imagined. He is a God of love.

The message contained here has been and still is very difficult for me to write. In fact, I have tried many times over the years to address this subject on paper, but ended by only feeling inadequate. It is a subject about which I have preached more than any other. But at the end of every message, I inevitably feel that I did not do proper justice to this tremendous theme. It is so deep and so profound that mere human expression just is not sufficient. Perhaps the truth is that the love of God is truly unfathomable. It is something which no human being could ever fully express. Nevertheless, the importance of the revelation of God's love for each and every believer is so great, so central to our experience of Christianity as He meant it to be, that I feel I must at least try to put some of my small revelation about this vast subject in writing. May God in His mercy grant an anointing and spirit of revelation on this writing so that it could be a vehicle to transport you into the fulness of God's love.

The Bible is an incomparable book. There has never been and there will never be another book like it. In fact, it would be impossible for any human being or even a group of human beings to write such a book. Only God could have done it. The complexity of the Bible, the intricacy and interweaving of the plots and story line, combined with the amazing accuracy and detail contained in it, place it far above any other work which has been written. When you add to all these considerations the fact that this book was not penned by one man at one time but by many different men over a period of thousands of years, its extraordinary character is even more evident. Any honest reader of this book will eventually be brought to his knees in worshipful awe of God Almighty.

As with many great pieces of literature, in the beginning of this marvelous book we find a few of what could be thought of as "seeds"—the first small introductions to all that will be taking place in the rest of its pages. The book of Genesis is not simply an interesting story or a fabled account of the early history of man. Instead, in the first few

chapters of the Bible we find in very concentrated form the essence of what God will be speaking to us throughout. In the first few pages of this book, the beginnings of all of God's intentions are manifested. Therefore, it seems important for us as we begin our investigation of God's purposes to look very carefully at the first several chapters of the Bible.

A MOMENTOUS DECISION

Shortly after the creation of this world, the God of glory held a solemn conference with Himself. Following this awesome consultation, He made the following pronouncement: "Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness" (Gen 1:26). This is a very significant thing. The creator of the universe decided to fashion a being which resembled Himself. Now why did God do something like this? Why would He make a creature which could be described as a miniature representation of Himself? Surely we must conclude that it was more than just a passing fancy but that our God had in His mind a glorious purpose. Man was not an experiment, an afterthought, or simply a new kind of creature with which to populate the earth. Instead, when He formed man God was setting in motion an unfathomable plan which emanated from the depths of His heart. Consequently, man is a unique creature in the Almighty's design. He was the only being created with this great privilege of being made in the image and likeness of the Most High God. Truly we are "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps 139:14).

God began His creation of the human race with a single individual, Adam. However, as He contemplated His creation (most of which He had earlier pronounced "very good" [Gen 1:31]), He noticed that something was missing. His attention was focused upon one lacking element which He evidently considered to be a very important deficiency—Adam had no wife. It was in this context that God uttered some words which are especially important and which I believe reveal to us something about His own heart. He said, "It is not good that man should be alone" (Gen 2:18). Why would God do such a thing? Why did He go to all the effort to create Adam and then as soon as the work was done, pronounce it unfinished? An incident like this must be more than coincidental. It seems possible that when He spoke this sentence about the first man, He was echoing a longing which He felt deep within His own heart. Could it be that our God does not enjoy being alone? Could it be that He desires an intimate union with a being like Himself? Could we possibly understand from this eloquent picture that perhaps our King intends to be married?

The answer to these questions is undoubtedly, YES. Beyond a doubt, God is speaking to us through this passage about something which is deeply upon His own heart. Keeping this thought in mind, let us examine more of the scriptures together and see how they indeed do support such a hypothesis.

THE SEARCH FOR A BRIDE

Shortly after making the first man, God declared His work incomplete and then set about "building" a bride for Adam. However, instead of immediately commencing this work, He did a most unusual thing. He first brought all the animals before Adam's gaze, and Adam named them. "But," we read, "there was not found a helper comparable to him" (Gen 2:20). What an interesting statement this is! It sounds as if God was not merely requiring Adam to name animals as a little duty before his

wedding but far more importantly He was looking for a suitable helper for him. He and Adam together were examining all these birds and beasts in search of a proper mate. However none could be found.

Of course I'm sure that many of these creatures were very nice. I imagine that some appeared quite cute, cuddly and furry. But somehow something was not right. None of them could stir a response within this man. So, as we have already discussed, God set to work to remedy the situation. Afterwards when Adam awoke he was presented with a beautiful sight. The woman whom God had made was standing before him. As he gazed upon her with delight something stirred in the deepest recesses of his heart. Something within his breast responded to this new creature. Then this powerful feeling which he had never felt before found expression in the words: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23). She was just like himself. What all of the creatures could never be to him, this woman was. Here he had found a proper counterpart with whom he could join in intimate union.

Now all this does have an extremely important application to our present discussion about God and His intentions. You see, even though He is surrounded by myriads of angels, even though His whole creation lies before Him, none of these other creatures are adequate to provide the intimacy and companionship He desires. None of them can fill this position because they were not similar to Himself. Just as Adam could not find a mate among any of the animals but had to wait until God prepared a wife for him, so too our Lord is looking for a "someone"—His future bride—of whom He could say, "She is like me, 'bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.'" Dear friends, this is far more than just a lesson in ancient history. Rather here we find an eloquent, prophetic illustration of an important spiritual principle. God's design for the universe is that only creatures which are similar can mate or marry. Only beings which are alike are permitted to have this kind of intimate union. Birds mate with birds, cattle with cattle, fish with fish, and so forth—each one after its own kind (Gen 1:21,24). This truth is clearly seen in the illustration we have just reviewed as well as being commanded by the scriptures (Lev 20:15,16). Therefore, in accordance with His own law, God can only join in intimate union with a being like Himself. In order for Him to marry, He must find a being who is His counterpart.

Many of the details contained in the first pages of Genesis confirm this supposition that God indeed does have and has had from the very beginning a burning desire for an intimate companion. It may be easy for the casual reader to overlook these items as being insignificant. However, here in the first few chapters of Genesis are revealed some substantial, clear indications of all God's future intentions concerning man.

TWO "PARALLEL" WEDDINGS

In the beginning of the Bible, we encounter the original wedding. The first man Adam finds and marries a beautiful woman, especially constructed by God for him. And if we read through to the end of the story, we will discover that the Bible also ends with a wedding. Jesus Christ, the "last Adam," receives a bride which has been especially prepared for Him. Now in the scriptural record there are many parallels between these two marriages. In fact, these parallels are so striking that I am forced to conclude that the Genesis account must be considered strongly prophetic. God, when introducing His book, placed in the first few pages a holy prophecy which is even now being fulfilled in His people.

Part of this prophecy concerning Adam and the creation of Eve, we have already examined. But as we look further, we discover even more wonderful indications of God's design. We should notice that God caused "a deep sleep to fall upon Adam"—a death-like state in which God's work upon him was done (Gen 2:21). While he was in this condition, an incision was made in his side and God removed something (our translations say it was a rib). Then from this part of Adam, God "built" (Heb) a woman for him. In a similar way our Lord Jesus entered into death for us on the cross. There, His side was also pierced and something came out of that side—"blood and water" (Jn 19:34). It is with this eternal substance which flowed from the side of our Savior that God is "building" (Mt 16:18) the bride of Christ, the eternal "woman" who will dwell with Him forever.

As we begin to read the first few pages of the Book, we encounter a wonderful garden. This garden was the scene of the first wedding. Out of this garden is flowing a river and in the middle of the garden grows a tree called "the tree of life" (Gen 2:9). Additionally the text mentions that in this land there is an abundant supply of gold, something called "bdellium" and onyx stone (Gen 2:11,12).

At the end of the book, in the account of Revelation, something of great splendor and glory is described. It is a city which is the scene of the last and most glorious wedding of the universe. But yet we notice that this city contains many of the same elements as the garden. Where we once read of gold buried in the ground in Eden, we now are shown an entire city radiating golden splendor and having its street paved with the same substance. The onyx stones described in the garden can now be seen along with many other precious stones, polished, perfected and built up into a glorious wall surrounding the entire structure. This wall, adorned with "all manner of precious stones," (Rev 21:19,20) is symbolic of all true believers in their transformed, glorified state.

In the New Jerusalem there is also a river. This one is a river of crystal clear "water of life," which gushes out from underneath the throne of God and the Lamb. That river, perhaps spiritually related to the one which we saw in the beginning, is now available for "whosoever will" to come and drink. It is here representative of the life of God Himself to whom we can come and be satisfied. Not only this but the tree of life which appears so singularly in the beginning is now growing abundantly on both sides of the river with its twelve crops (one crop each month) of fruit freely available to everyone. Even the leaves of this tree are important: they provide healing for the nations.

Now let us not forget the "bdellium." This word is encountered in chapter 2, verse 12. We've often read about it here in this verse, but what is it? If you don't know, then you are in good company. Even the Bible scholars and translators do not really know. In fact, the meaning is so obscure that they have borrowed this Latin word "bdellium" instead of an English translation. One of the best ways to determine a word's meaning is to discover how it is used elsewhere in the Bible. So we can use this method to help us with our inquiry. The only other place where this word appears is in connection with the "heavenly bread," manna, which is described as being small, white and round (Ex 16:14,31), and "the color of bdellium" (Num 11:7). Therefore, I would like to suggest that this word bdellium could be referring to what we know today as pearl—something small, white and round. In fact, two ancient manuscripts translate this word as "pearl." So, since Biblical scholars do not really know what this substance is and since, as you will soon see, this translation harmonizes so well with other parts of God's word, I think that it could be acceptable to adopt this meaning.

THE GATES OF PEARL

Looking again at the New Jerusalem, we find that each of its twelve gates is composed of a single large pearl. Do you know how a pearl is formed? It begins when a grain of sand or some other small irritating object gets into the shell of an oyster. As this irritation increases, the oyster begins to secrete a juice from its side which surrounds the offending object with a layer of smooth, precious, pearly substance. Out of a wound comes something of great value. Surely such an illustration is pointing us to the Savior. When His side was pierced, a substance came out which has provided a “gateway” for us—our entrance into that eternal city. He is the “Pearl of great price” (Mt 13:46).

So you see that all the raw materials about which we read in the scene of the first wedding have, by the end of the book, been prepared and built up into a glorious setting for an eternal wedding—the wedding of God’s own Son. While in the beginning we are shown a man receiving his wife in the midst of a garden, at the end it is God’s people who are participants in that indescribably holy event: the marriage of the Lamb. In fact, the city itself is described as a bride adorned for her Husband (Rev 21:2). The beginning and ending of this book, though written thousands of years apart, are thus seen in unsurpassed harmony which could only come from God Himself. Now, after considering all this, don’t you also believe that God has been desiring this from the beginning? Don’t you see beautifully depicted here an illustration of God’s heart’s desire? All these parallels from the beginning and end of the scriptures cannot be an accident. Surely they must be speaking to us something of eternal consequence and importance. God is revealing to us His heart’s desire.

In the creation of man we can also find further support for this understanding. Since man was made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26), it is not unreasonable to suppose that to some degree our inner feelings reflect those of our Maker. And one of the most powerful desires within a man or woman is to be married to someone they deeply love. Therefore, love and the desire for intimate companionship cannot be very far from the heart of God. When we read in John 3:16 “For God so loved the world,” what do you think this love is like? Is it just some sort of paternal pity? Is it simply attributable to the fact that God feels sorry for us poor, sinful, little human beings whom He made and so has decided to rescue us? Perhaps God’s love includes such elements as these, but I believe that in God’s love for the world is embodied something much more profound. For God so loved the world! The intensity of His love is beyond description. It is so much a part of His nature that in one passage of scripture we read that “God is love” (I Jn 4:16). I believe that you will see as we proceed through this book that this speaks of the love which He has for His bride. It is nothing less than the Heavenly Father’s desire for eternal companionship with someone like Himself.

When Jesus was with His disciples eating what we call “the last supper” He said: “With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you” (Lk 22:15). Why was there such an intense desire within His breast to eat this simple meal with His friends? The answer no doubt lies in the thought that it was reminding Him of a future feast—a wedding feast which was coming. Jesus was looking forward to His wedding day, and there was a burning desire, a yearning within Him for His bride. This is why He had such an intense longing to sup there with His twelve disciples in preparation for all that was lying ahead.

THE JOY SET BEFORE HIM

We read in another place that it was “for the joy that was set before Him” that He endured the cross (Heb 12:2). What was this joy set before Him? Was it simply the joy of entering into the glory of His Father? This does not seem to be an adequate explanation since He had already shared the glory of the Father before the world was created (Jn 17:5). No, it was something even greater, something even deeper, something even closer to His heart. The joy set before Him was the joy of a man who is waiting to receive His bride. It is the joy of a man on his wedding day when he is getting married to the woman whom he loves. Jesus was looking into the future and beholding the one with whom He was to be joined in intimate union. It was this view, this joyful thought which spurred Him on to sacrifice Himself for us. In Isaiah 62:5 we read: “As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.”

What a wonderful day that will be when all of God’s redeemed people are built into one holy “woman” and prepared for that glorious wedding day. This is the joy which was set before Him and dear brothers and sisters it is also the joy which is set before us. Oh that God would give us a vision and revelation of that wonderful wedding day and all that it entails—God and man joining in most holy union—so that we may run the race with joy! Hallelujah! Such a view will surely cause us to lay aside everything—all the weight and the sin which so easily besets us (Heb 12:1)—and pursue Him and His purposes with all our hearts. Oh, that God would enlighten us to see His will from His perspective! Then we would be impelled onward towards His goal which is also our highest satisfaction.

The Apostle Paul speaks concerning this future intimacy with our Creator when he says: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him” (I Cor 2:9). Then he goes on to qualify this by stating that God does indeed reveal these “deep things” (vs 10) to those who are intimate with Him. Our Lord is calling us into a love relationship with Himself. This is a relationship which will culminate in a union with the Most High which can only be described in terms of marriage. These are not my terms but are the language of the Bible—words which God Himself chose to describe these things to us in a way we could understand.

Human marriage, with all the intimacy it entails, is something which has been created and sanctified by God. Within the covenant bonds of matrimony, almost nothing is proscribed by our Maker. We have only to read the Song of Solomon to realize how God views this kind of relationship. This book is so personal and contains such graphic allusions to marital intimacy that many people—even believers—cannot read it without becoming uncomfortable. Evidently their flesh is too strong and therefore they are stimulated wrongly. However, here in the Bible, God illustrates for us our future spiritual joys. He is using physical, human terms and describing the intense enjoyment of two married people but there is no doubt in my mind that He is actually speaking about Himself and His bride. Of course this book does have its application to our earthly marriages of this age, but many great saints of God who have gone before us including Hudson Taylor and Watchman Nee have seen here a prophetic word. Psalms 16:11 states: “In Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

Another passage reads: “Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be” (I Jn 3:2). This verse used to trouble me because I could not envision a higher relationship with God than that of being one of His sons. But the

scriptures do speak of such a position. Today we are God's sons and so we relate to Him on that basis, but someday, oh what a glorious day, we will enter into another kind of relationship with Him. Someday we will be His wife. Although a child may have a good deal of intimacy with his father, the wife enjoys a much deeper relationship.

A HOLY UNION WITH GOD

These words "bride" and "wife" convey thoughts of enjoyment and intimacy which might be misunderstood by the carnal mind. But I pray that as you read these words and meditate upon the scriptures concerning these things, God will unveil your eyes to this glorious truth. According to the unmistakably clear words of the Bible, God is calling His people into a holy union with Himself which can only be described as a marriage. Surely, this will not be a physical relationship as we have on earth, but rather the physical intimacy which we have here is simply a picture of future spiritual joys.

Perhaps some readers will find it difficult to think of God as a future marriage partner. Instead, it is often easier to know Him as our Savior or Father. While these are indeed roles which God has in our lives, the position of being our future husband is certainly the most intimate. Our God is a God of passionate love and this love is focused on us, mere human beings. The scriptures reveal to us the heart of God, and in His heart is a kind of divine romance, a fervent love for His future bride. Don't limit yourself merely to the way in which you have known Him in the past. Don't be afraid to open up to a greater revelation of His person and character. The God whom the Bible reveals is our own Lord and King. You can confidently believe that what His word reveals about Himself is true.

Not only does God have a passionate love toward us, but He is searching for those who will love Him in the same way. Do you remember the first commandment? "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Mt 22:37). Does this sound like something impersonal and distant? Certainly not! Usually when someone loves another with such fervor we say that they are "in love." Do you have this kind of relationship with God? Is He your first love? Or are you keeping Him at arm's length, trying to be satisfied with a kind of impersonal, "safe" sort of God who has very little to do with your inner, secret life?

Let us read together from the book of Ephesians, chapter 3, verses 16-19. Here Paul is praying for the brethren that they (and we also) would "be rooted and grounded in love." And from this position "may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." You see, knowing the love of God is important. In fact, it is essential for us if we are going to enter into a deep, full, satisfying relationship with Him. When you know that someone loves you completely and thoroughly, then it is easy to open your heart to them, trusting that they will deal with what they find there in love. So it is with our relationship with God. All believers need an intimate, open-hearted, nothing-secret relationship with Jesus. We must allow Him access to the innermost recesses of our being. There can be nothing hidden. Nothing from the past, nothing which has happened to us, nothing must be kept from His loving inspection and touch.

TOTAL TRUST

This kind of relationship is only possible when we have absolute confidence in

the love of the Person to whom we are yielding ourselves. It is essential that we come to know the depths of God's love. If not, we will only have a superficial, unsatisfying relationship with Him. He will never be able to penetrate to the core of our being and transform these parts to His image. When we have fears, inner walls and resistances, this serves to show that we have not yet truly known the love of God. "He that fears has not been made perfect in love" (I Jn 4:18).

You may notice while reading in the book of Revelation that the bride of Christ is "clear as crystal" (Rev 21:11). This bride has nothing hidden, dark or reserved. There are no secrets from her beloved. Her trust in Him enables her to be completely transparent, allowing Him access to all of her. This is the kind of relationship which we must find with our Lord. It is a relationship of deepest love. It is an intimacy of the highest, purest kind which leads us into "all the fulness of God." The greatest need in our Christian lives is this: a passionate love relationship with God, leading to an intimacy with Him and resulting in transformation into the image of God.

I would like to repeat that the interrelationship between the first part of the Bible and the last is not a coincidence. This is not just a nice story. Instead, in these pages God is revealing tremendous things about Himself and His desires which He wants us to understand. What a wonderful picture the book of Revelation gives us. All the seeds, all the hints which are portrayed for us in the book of Genesis have now reached fruition and fulfillment. The raw materials have been built up. The entire structure has been completed. All that God the Father set out to do in the beginning has been accomplished. There the man Christ Jesus is seen receiving His bride, that holy city New Jerusalem. She is coming down out of heaven prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

God's holy book begins and ends with a wedding. What an incredible love story this is! Have you ever heard one to equal it? How tremendous the love of God for mankind must be to cause Him to begin to do all these things and then to overcome such tremendous obstacles to accomplish them. How we need to see and sense within ourselves the yearning desire within the heart of God for mankind—the desire He expresses so clearly in Jeremiah where He says to His people, "I have loved you with an everlasting love" (Jer 31:3). I believe that this kind of revelation will plant within our breast a similar yearning for our future husband that will cause us to make ourselves ready (Is 54:5). May we by His mercy be preparing ourselves until He comes.