

## The Church Part 12: The Bride of Christ—Then, Now, Forever

*Hosea 4:1-2, 6, 12; 2:13-20; Revelation 19:6-9*

© Rev. Nollie Malabuyo, September 17, 2023 (Big Springs Community Church)

Dear congregation of Christ: In 2018, Jessica Hayes, a schoolteacher in Indiana, was a bride in a wedding ceremony. She wore the usual white wedding gown, a veil, and had a ring. But, strangely, there was no bridegroom because she was getting married to Christ. Hayes is what the Roman Catholic Church defines as a “consecrated virgin,” a “bride of Christ.” Her vow is to never engage in sexual or romantic relationships, for that would be “adultery” against the Bridegroom, Christ himself.

Her ring symbolizes her “betrothal” to Christ, because the Catholic catechism says, “Virgins who, committed to the holy plan of following Christ more closely, are consecrated to God by the diocesan bishop according to the approved liturgical rite, are betrothed mystically to Christ.” Hayes is one of 254 “brides of Christ” in the U.S., and one of the more than 4,000 in the world.

This metaphor the church, “the Bride of Christ,” is always mocked by unbelievers. John Guare, a playwright and screenwriter, once wrote, “I wanted to be a Bride of Christ, but I guess now I’m a young divorcee.” Hilary Mantel, a British Communist writer, also said, “The Revolution is your bride,” as the Church is the Bride of Christ.” Even Shane Claiborne, a Pentecostal writer, in lamenting the disunity of different churches and denominations, said, “We’ve got to unite ourselves as one body. Because Jesus is coming back, and he’s coming back for a bride not a harem.”

Today, we will study this term for the church: the Bride of Christ. We find this metaphor not only in the New Testament, but also in the Old Testament. In the Book of Hosea, God condemns and judges his people, the Israelites, for being an unfaithful, adulterous wife. She was driven away by God, but later, God restored her back to him as his wife. In Revelation 19, and in many other New Testament texts, we read that the church, all those who repent of their sins and believe in Christ alone as Savior, is the Bride of Christ, who is the Bridegroom. And when the Bridegroom comes, he will gather and take his Bride to heaven, where there will be a wedding feast. And there, the Bride will be dwelling with her Bridegroom forever.

Therefore, our theme today is, **The Church Part 12: The Bride of Christ**, under three headings.

### Once Unfaithful and Impure

God’s people are described all throughout Scriptures as the husband of God. Addressing his people Israel, God says of them, “*For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name*” (Isa 54:5a). In our reading in Hosea 2:19- 20, God says again, “*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.*” If you ever read Ezekiel Chapter 16, it is one of the longest and most detailed description of how the LORD nurtured, nourished, cherished, provided for, and lavished his people Israel with love, from her birth, to infancy, to childhood, and into adulthood.

When she was a beautiful woman ready to be married, God betrothed her to himself as his wife (1-14). God made a covenant with her, promising to give her everything she needed (8). And God did, adorning her with gold and silver, clothing her with fine linen and silk, nourishing her with the finest, most delicious, and healthy food. She became as royalty, and her beauty and splendor bestowed on her by the LORD spread among the nations (10-14). No doubt, these verses describe Israel in its history. She was a poor, unwanted slave in Egypt. God redeemed her from slavery, and gave her the Promised Land of Canaan, described in Deuteronomy 8:7–10, as a bountiful land of brooks, fountains and springs; a land of wheat, barley, vines, figs, pomegranates, olives, and honey; a land that yields iron and copper for their farming tools and equipment. They would lack nothing.

But how did Israel, God's beautiful wife, respond to his great love and goodness? From verses 15-34, she became an adulterer, *"But you trusted in your beauty and played the whore because of your renown and lavished your whorings on any passerby; your beauty became his"* (15). She used her beauty, gold and silver, fine garments, and good food to entice her lovers. She even made images of her men (16-19). The LORD condemned her for sacrificing even her sons and daughters to her pagan idols. So great was her adultery, that it involved not only one man, but many, *"any passerby,"* referring to the Egyptians, Assyrians, and Babylonians (26, 28-29). These adulteries refer to Israel's political and military alliances with these pagan neighbors, trusting in these kings more than trusting in the LORD.

In response to her idolatry, wickedness and unfaithfulness, God punished her. From verses 35-43, the LORD vowed that he would gather her lovers around her, not to commit adultery with her, but to destroy her, and her beauty, riches, and idols. God condemned her more than Sodom and Samaria, her sisters, who were wicked, saying, *"[You] have made your sisters appear righteous by all the abominations that you have committed"* (51).

This is how Hosea also describes idolatrous and rebellious Israel: is an unfaithful, idolatrous wife, not merely idolatrous, but a prostitute. They had no faithfulness, steadfast love, and knowledge of God. Their evil acts consist of *"swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery"* (Hos 4:1-2a). In verse 12, God says, "they have left their God to play the whore." Similar to Ezekiel 16, God would punish Israel for her idolatry, and her adorning and beautifying herself to go after her lovers (2:13). Therefore, one by one, her lovers—Assyrians, Babylonians, and Egyptians—destroyed, plundered, and enslaved unfaithful Israel.

But the LORD was not done with Israel; there was hope.

## **Now Betrothed Again in Love and Mercy**

Israel's punishment would not last forever. She would not be driven out of God's house totally and forever. Her restoration from 70 years of slavery and exile in Babylon and Persia would end, as God has promised. God would destroy one of Israel's former lovers, Babylon, by a Persian invasion. In fact, God would make Babylon an "everlasting waste." Cyrus the king of Persia would then allow the Jews to return to their homeland (Jer 25:12; 29:10).

In our reading of Hosea 2:16-20, we first learn that Israel would cease from calling the LORD, "My Baal." Instead, she would again call the LORD, "My husband." Hebrew scholars point out that

the Hebrew word for “my Baal” sounded like the word for “my husband,” which is *baali* (e.g., Exo 21:22). Israel would cease worshiping idols after they are forgiven and restored. Wild beasts would not be roaming the fields. She would again have dominion over them and other creatures. Furthermore, they would not suffer from invasion by their enemies, so they would be dwelling safely in the land.

However, these good things and prosperity would not last long. Israel again descended into wickedness, so God sent more invaders after Babylon: Syrians, Egyptians, and Romans, who finally destroyed the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. Then, we wonder, how is God fulfilling his promise, “I will betroth you to me forever”?

The answer is, God is fulfilling his promise to his betrothed beloved through a new covenant. In this new covenant, the LORD would transform his beloved’s stony hearts into soft hearts that the Holy Spirit would mold into the image of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. He would write his Law into her heart and mind. Therefore, she would be a faithful Bride, betrothing her in “*righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy.*” She would know her Bridegroom the Lord with an intimate knowledge. In the ancient Near East, betrothal involved public covenant promises between the fathers of the man and the woman—including the payment of a dowry to the man’s family. It is marriage, signed and sealed, except for the actual ceremony and consummation of the marriage.

The New Testament frequently refers to God’s people, the church, as his Bride. John the Baptizer declared to his disciples that he is merely a friend of the Bridegroom, who is Jesus, and he rejoices when Jesus finally appeared (John 3:29). The Apostle Paul likens the relationship between an earthly husband and wife to Christ as the Bridegroom and the church as his Bride. As the husband is the head of the wife, so is Christ the head of the church. Husbands must love, nourish, and cherish their wives, just as Christ loves, nourishes, and cherishes his Bride, the church.

Much more than this earthly love is Christ’s heavenly, eternal love for his Bride. He gave himself up for her, sacrificing himself on the cross, so that her sins would be cleansed. Paul says this since he was the one who led us to love Christ, “*I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ*” (2 Cor 11:2). God chose us in Christ our Bridegroom to be “*holy and blameless*” before God (Eph 1:4). His Bride is described as virgins because they are spiritually pure in Christ (Rev 14:4), because he has cleansed her, making her spotless and without blemish, and beautiful in splendor. This one Bride would consist of a multitude of pure virgins, not only from the Jews, but from all tribes, peoples, and languages from all nations of the world (Rev 5:9; 7:9).

As the Bride of Christ, how do we measure up to this holy, solemn vow and standard of spiritual purity? Are we practicing purity in our words, deeds and thoughts, before a watching world? There is no biblical basis for a virgin being “married” to Jesus and vowing to be physically and spiritually pure forever. But are we able to make the same holy vows and practices to our Jesus our Bridegroom to the end of our lives, as many of us has made in our wedding vows, “till death do us part”? And since we are the Bride of Christ forever, our marriage to him is forever, even after the end of our earthly lives.

## The Unblemished Bride in Eternity

In this life, we are already “betrothed” to our Bridegroom. But the wedding ceremony and feast still awaits. Jesus tells of a parable that relates to this wedding ceremony and the wedding feast, the Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matt 25:1-13). In the middle of the night, the bridegroom and his friends leave his home to go the home of the bride, where she is waiting. The ceremony is performed in the bride’s home. Then, after these proceedings, the wedding party all return to the house of the bridegroom where the wedding banquet is held.

In the parable, the virgins adorn and robe the bride and make sure that the house is all orderly and decorated. In the middle of the night, they are tired, and they fell asleep. The wise virgins took oil with them for their lamps, but the foolish ones did not. So when they heard the joyful shout, *“Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him,”* the virgins awoke. The five wise ones lit their lamps, the other five could not because they had no oil. So they hurried out to buy oil, but when they came back, the bridegroom and his party already went into the house, and the door was shut according to tradition. The five foolish virgins begged to be allowed to enter in, but the Lord of the house said, *“I do not know you.”*

Those are horrible words. It reminds us of unrepentant people who would say to Christ on Judgment Day that they did all kinds of good things in his name, but he would answer them, *“I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness”* (Matt 7:23). Who are these “foolish virgins”? These are those wicked people who are shut out of the new heaven and earth in Revelation 22:15, *“Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.”* If you are not sure that you will be allowed to enter into the new heaven and earth, your guarantee is coming to Christ in true faith and wholehearted repentance of your sins.

During the wedding supper of the Lamb, the Bride of Christ is clothed in pure white, *“the righteous deeds of the saints.”* She is the *“holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband”* (Rev 21:2, 9). In Psalm 45, as the Bridegroom King is majestic and handsome, so is his Bride beautiful and glorious. During the wedding feast, the Bride is presented to her King *“in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish”* (Eph 5:26-27). When this wedding feast arrives, the Bride would consist of an innumerable number of God’s people, united into one head, and they shall be called *“Children of the living God”* (Hos 1:10-11). Even now, Christ is alluring her Bride to return to him for that great heavenly wedding feast.

**B**eloved Christian friends: In this vale of tears called the world, there is much suffering, afflictions, troubles, and persecutions. Our brothers and sisters in many nations are being persecuted. Just last week, Muslims burned houses and 21 churches in a small city in Pakistan. And this is happening daily in many anti-Christian nations. Our only hope and trust as the Bride of Christ is that on a day and hour that no one knows, there will be great voice from heaven announcing, *“Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.”*

Then shall be fulfilled our longing for that final wedding feast, consummation, and rest with Christ our Bridegroom. He who came down from heaven to seek and to save his holy Bride from all toil and tribulation and war. He came to defend, guide, sustain, and cherish her Bride to the end.