

TUTORIAL
7.2

Building, Body, Bride

This tutorial reminds us that God is personally invested in relating to us - as individuals and as groups - and that the primary relationship He is pursuing on the earth right now is with the Church, His *Body*. He invites us to contribute in the construction of His Building, the nourishment and growth of His Body and the preparation of His Bride.

Last Time

We considered how God the Author has carefully laid out the plot of His Great Narrative in ways that are consistent with who He is. At this time in that unfolding Narrative, He is focused on His Church - the gathering of His called-out people that He loves dearly. He is carefully building a Temple for Himself, precisely placing each “stone”: people who have trusted in Jesus for salvation. This was previously a mystery but it was revealed to the apostles and it continues to be unveiled day by day as He extends this project. He invites us, His people, to be involved in that building work, but we have to understand and work in ways that are consistent with who He is...according to the plan that we find embedded in His Word.

Personally invested

Something that we’ve seen emerge from God’s Narrative over and over again is just how personally He is invested in His Creation, particularly in the relationship He is seeking with His image-bearing race. The whole point of creation was to have an environment, which would speak to its human inhabitants of His love, faithfulness, wisdom and power...an environment that would serve the purposes of mutual dialogue He clearly delights in. Even after the human race rejected this relationship, He remained committed, providing a way for them to relate that would not violate His perfectly righteous character. We see this deep personal investment too in the individual relationships that He nurtured - with Abraham, Moses, David, and then most amazingly, in the relationship of God the Father and Spirit with Jesus Christ, the Son.

But we also see that God relates to people, not only as individuals, but as groups... the human race, Adam’s descendants, the inhabitants of the earth, the Egyptians, the tribes in Palestine, and of course, the nation of Israel. This

last was a tempestuous and often tragic relationship as God's Chosen People time and time again turned away from Him. But He constantly testified to His unchanging love for them. They were *His*, He said; His *special treasure* set apart through the Covenant He made with them among the rocks and sand of Sinai, after rescuing them from Egypt (Exodus 19:4).

Over the centuries God often used the most personal, intimate terms in speaking to His People. In the words of His prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 3:19-20) He said to them that He would love to treat them as His children, and had looked forward to them calling Him Father. Tragically though, the relationship has broken His heart...He feels more like a loving husband whose unfaithful wife has left Him. But despite all their lack of gratitude and trust, their faithlessness and regular rejection, God was willing to live among His people, the nation of Israel...to have a special presence right in their community.

A new kind of relationship

And then the New Covenant was initiated through the death of Jesus and a new era began in God's engagement with His Creation. He continues to love the world of course and to seek out any who'll respond from His lost race of image-bearers. And He has not given up on His chosen nation, Israel, but the relationship had always been underpinned by the Promise of the Messiah He would send.

Of course they failed to recognise, and violently rejected Him, when He came to live among them as a man. So a new Covenant, defining a new kind of relationship, was drawn up. On the day of Pentecost, God's Spirit came into the world in order to live with those people who by faith have been fully identified with God's beloved Son, Jesus. But, as has always been the case, God relates to them, and to us, not only as individuals but also as a Group...gathered together in Christ, joined together by the Spirit. During the time in history we live in now, His greatest expression of delight and affection is reserved for the Church, His special, blood-bought people.

The Body

In the last tutorial (7.1), we focused on the picture embedded in the Narrative, of God building a Temple. But as we said, this is not just a detached, impersonal exercise, with Him as a distant Architect. Far from it! This is very personal, very real, and very immediate for God. To help us understand this in more than just theoretical propositions, He has used two other images or metaphors that help us feel it in an intuitive and emotional way. In fact, it's worth pondering whether as the great, wise Author, God threaded these things into creation and human experience, in part at least, so we would have these images to help us understand His relationship with His *Ecclesia*. The first of these is the *Body*; certainly in His Narrative He doesn't only *liken* the Church to

a body, His Body, but He says it actually *is* that. He says that Christ is the Head, and we are His legs, arms, feet, etc.

Unity in the Body

Sitting in his rented house in Rome, while waiting for his trial before the Emperor, Paul was reflecting on the topic of *authority* in a letter to his friends in Ephesus (Ephesians 1:22). He reminded them that Jesus Christ is in a place of honour and power with God, and that He has the ultimate and final authority in everything, both in the present and future. God has given Him this authority for our sake, the Church...because He is our head, and we are His Body. A little further on in the letter (Ephesians 2:14-15), Paul adds the amazing thought for the ethnically mixed group of believers, that because we've all been identified with the death of Jesus' *physical* body at Golgotha, any superficial distinctions such as race no longer exist for us as His *spiritual* Body, the Church.

As with anything or anyone we care deeply about, Jesus has hopes and dreams for this Group that is so much a part of Him...this Body that shares His identity. But with God, it's never just a dream of what *could* be; it's also a declaration of what *will* be. To ensure that it does happen, Jesus has provided all the raw materials - the Truth - and He continues to give His Body every possible assistance in utilising those resources. As His mouthpiece, guided by His Spirit, Paul articulates the Vision and Purpose that Jesus, the Head, has for His Body (Ephesians 4:13-16). He wants it to become mature and in every way to reflect Him so there are no anomalies between the Head and Body. He is looking for perfect unity within His Body, a healthy, loving and growing Group of His People.

The Bride

Paul, still trying to help the Ephesians understand just how personally invested Jesus is in His Church, blends the imagery of a Body with that of a *Bride*. This, of course, ties right back to the very beginning, when God knew that the first human being He had made, Adam, needed a companion who was of the same race. Seeing her for the first time, Adam immediately knew that this person was designed exactly to share his life with him. They fulfilled each other in a way that no other could. God's Narrative observes that two humans bonded in marriage in this way now become *one* in a very real sense, their identities are merged inseparably. Paul says that this is exactly the case of the bond of Jesus Christ and His Body, His Church.

Bought at immeasurable cost

But again, this is not just a disembodied reality that can be somehow studied in a laboratory, or reduced to formulas, or even, ultimately, to be pinned down as doctrine. Just as the Church itself is a mystery in the process of being revealed, so too is the husband-like care and love that Christ feels toward His Church.

It's an unfolding mystery because there is no limit to it. After all, He gave up everything for the Church. Like a husband who is willing to forgo His own rights, including the basic right of survival and self-preservation - He was willing to die for the Church. Looking ahead and seeing the desperately lost people who put their trust in Him, His heart went out to them. He was determined to make that group of people His own; to set it apart as His special companion; to meld its identity with His own; to unlock the potential He could see in these individuals working together as one Body for His majestic and wonderful purposes.

Marriage in the First Century

This picture of the Church as Bride is particularly rich in imagery when viewed through the lens of the culture in which the New Testament Narrative was recorded. In the first century, people from a Judean cultural background would have understood marriage rather differently from the way we do. The first step was the betrothal, a legally binding contract drawn up between the groom and father of the bride. According to their traditions, at that point, the marriage had already taken place, even though the couple did not live together as man and wife until later - sometimes years later - when all the financial obligations in the contract were dealt with. As we'll remember from the events surrounding Jesus' birth, this was the situation of Mary and Joseph when she became pregnant with Jesus. We can imagine the groom longing for the day when he could finally go in procession with his friends and shout out to let the bride's family and friends know that he was coming to claim her. Then, the third and final stage was the wedding feast, when everyone was invited to publicly celebrate the marriage at the groom's home.

When Paul was writing the second of his letters to the church in Corinth - a city famous for immoral cultish practices - he urged them not to waver in their devotion to the Lord Jesus (2 Corinthians 11:2). He yearns for them to be like a pure, betrothed young woman waiting for her groom to claim her. Jesus' much-loved disciple John was also given insights, through the rich imagery of marriage, of how the Lord feels about His Church. In the Revelation that John received from God of future events, he heard people around God's throne rejoicing because the time had come for the wedding feast of the Lamb, the One who'd given His life in her place. She was ready for Him, they said, perfectly clothed in the good things God had led His people to do for Him (Revelation 19:7-8). Then a little later, John records that he sees the Church coming to meet the Lord, just "like a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband."

Architect and Building

In the previous tutorial we noted the metaphor of a *Building*, particularly God building a place for Himself to live, that emerges at different points of the Narrative. Under the New Covenant the Great *Architect* and builder is carefully

building His Church. He invites us to be part of this construction project. And so we need His help in understanding the blueprint of what He intends to accomplish, and insights into how He is going about it so that we can be wise master builders.

Head and Body

But the Church is not something He's creating *out there*, a pet project He picks up now and then. It's actually a part of who He is. Jesus Christ is the *Head* and the Church is His *Body* - His arms and legs, hands and feet, living and doing His work in the created world. He has given life to this Body and now He is nourishing and encouraging it to grow towards a healthy maturity so it can do, and be, all He intends. We have a responsibility to understand what that health and maturity looks like so we can work alongside Him to encourage the existing Body and cultivate its outward growth.

Groom and Bride

This is not something He's doing out of obligation or necessity, just because He is attached to the Church...far from it. The image of a Bride helps us feel what Jesus, the Groom, feels towards His Church, the eager anticipation with which He longs for the day when He will return and claim the Gathering of His People to be with them forever. Right now He is preparing her: "clothing" the Church in the attitudes, worship, and work that He has for her. We have a responsibility to understand what that is and how the Bride is intended to be completed so she can be presented to Him and reflect His glory at the final reunion and wedding feast.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Building, Body, Bride

1. Would you agree that there is much more focus on the *Kingdom* rather than the *Church* in contemporary Christian teaching? If not, please give some examples of what leads you to that conclusion. If so, share your opinion on why you feel that might be. Do you see some links to any systems of theology that would lead towards a greater emphasis on the *Kingdom* than the *Church*? Share any thoughts you have on how you think this fits in with God's Narrative.

2. Please reflect on your own journey towards caring for and loving the Body and Bride of Christ in the way that He does. Can you identify any of the main challenges for you to grow in your appreciation of the Church?