

# CONTENTS

Introduction: To Better Imagine, Feel, and Live Out God's Love	9
<b>PART 1: HOW WE ARE BELOVED</b>	
1: Beloved to the Lord	19
2: Beloved to One Another	33
<b>PART 2: HOW WE LIVE BELOVED</b>	
3: Initiative	47
4: Words	57
5: Delight	71
6: Intimacy	81
7: Presence	97
8: Commitment	111
9: Passion	127
10: Conflict	139
11: Perseverance	157
Closing Thoughts	165
Acknowledgments	169
Notes	170

# BELOVED TO THE LORD

**After a full day of activities** with my friends and family, I was finally alone.

I was by myself for these last few hours before I would head to the church. I had been waiting for this moment since I knew that Dennaë was the woman I wanted to marry. And now the moment was finally here. My life would dramatically change in only a few hours' time.

And it really did change. From the moment I said "I do," my life was bound up with a woman who would never again be only "a woman" to me but instead be "my wife." Everything I thought about myself, how I moved through the world, how I experienced my successes and failures, they would all now happen in the context of marriage to this specific woman.

Marriage is a uniquely defining relationship because of how thoroughly and profoundly it touches every aspect of who you are and how you live. We are living in a time when marriage is sometimes seen as insignificant. With increasing rates of cohabitation, marriage can be treated as just a more formal way to finalize living with someone. Yet even with those trends, marriage still stands

out because of how it uniquely lays a claim on a person's life. It's what makes marriage unlike any other relationship.

Entering into marriage is not just deciding to be lifelong roommates with someone. It is not simply agreeing to share some common hobbies with someone. It is something much more mystical and magical. Marriage is becoming one with another person. Your whole self unites with the whole self of someone else, creating a new community, or unit, of persons. Marriage is a committed relationship of love and fellowship that will be particular to the people in that relationship. It is a relationship of commitment and love that shapes and defines you in the context of your relationship with your spouse.

It's striking then to consider that marriage is the metaphor used to describe the relationship we have with the Lord. That we, God's people, can be said to be *married* to God. The Lord God of the Bible, the one true God, is thoroughly and fully united to us and we to Him. God willingly enters into a new space when He forms a relationship with us, wherein who we are and who God is from that point on is shaped and defined by this new relationship.

### **VIVID, NOT VAGUE**

Marriage isn't the only metaphor used in the Bible to describe the relationship of God to His people. God is rightly described as being a king over us. God can also be said to be our shepherd. He is also father to us. These are all important metaphors to help us understand how we relate to Him. However, out of all the ways to describe how God is toward us, arguably the most distinctive and striking metaphor is to say that God is a husband to us.

It's worth noting here that Judaism is the only faith in which the nation, rather than a goddess or some representative

individual female, was the bride of their god. The way pagan people talked about or related to their gods was much different. Their gods were self-centered and manipulated humans for their own benefit. People could only hope to convince their gods to be good to them, and so they offered sacrifices in exchange for the favors they sought. The pagan relationship with gods was one of struggle, each party vying for control in order to get what they wanted.

But with Yahweh, the God of the Bible, we have something unique. Here we see human beings having a relationship with God marked not by manipulation or coercion. This relationship is not superficial or primarily transactional. Instead, the Bible speaks of human beings having a relationship with God characterized by unity. By intimacy. By commitment. By love.

It says something about the very nature of reality that the One who created everything wants to be so close to us, so connected to us, that the best way to describe this strong desire on His part is that He wants to be married to us. The story that holds the universe together, the story that angels watch with excitement and eagerly retell to one another as they sit around the campfires of heaven, is the love story of God seeking after, finding, and then marrying His people. A story that culminates in His people being together with Him in a forever union of fellowship and love.

Jonathan Edwards writes, “The creation of the world seems to have been especially for this end, that the eternal Son of God might obtain a spouse, towards whom he might fully exercise the infinite benevolence of his nature, and to whom he might,

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as it were, open and pour forth all that immense foundation of condescension, love, and grace that was in his heart, and that in this way God might be glorified.”<sup>1</sup>

It does feel a bit strange to talk this way about God. To say that we are “married” to God? It’s strange to imagine, much less say out loud.

But maybe that’s because of how abstract our understanding of God and His love tends to be. We tend to talk and think in vague ways about having a relationship of love with God. If I were to ask you what you immediately think about when you hear someone say, “God loves you,” what comes to mind? Some kind of shimmery image of an actor who has played Jesus smiling at you? An old man in a white robe giving you a hug or a couple of good pats on the back to show how he’s happy to be with you?

The thing is, the Bible doesn’t give us vague or trite descriptions when it says that God loves us. The Bible talks in direct and vivid language on this topic. If we want to understand what God’s love is, and understand it at its purest, strongest, most enduring and intimate level, we must talk about His love through the metaphor of marriage—that God loves His people as a husband should love his wife.

## **THE STORY BEGINS**

We can start by looking in the Old Testament. Here we see God clearly described as being husband of His people, which was the nation of Israel at that time.

God intentionally establishes a relationship with Israel, beginning with their ancestor Abraham and his family. Later, God rescues Israel from captivity in Egypt and then establishes a covenant with the people at Sinai, ratifying it through sacrifice. The people

then set off into the wilderness, with God leading them, providing food and water for them all along the way until He brings them to a home in Canaan, a fertile and rich land.

These are the basic elements of the story of the beginning of the relationship between God and Israel. And notably, all the elements in this story are the elements that make up the beginnings of a marriage.

The story begins with God initiating toward Israel, making an official commitment on Mount Sinai by establishing a covenant with them. This covenant is akin to a formal marriage commitment. God and Israel were to be exclusive to each other, living with each other, committed only to each other. They had certain obligations in the relationship: God leading, protecting, and providing for His people, and His people honoring and submitting to God's loving leading and care.

Old Testament professor Seock-Tae Sohn has noted that many scholars talk about how the Sinai covenant is set up like an ancient Hittite political treaty. This isn't a wrong comparison. However, it is not the only background to this covenant. The covenant established between God and Israel is also found in ancient marriage customs, which were a form of covenant. (For example, see Malachi 2:14.) Indeed, the covenant that God establishes between Himself and Israel is explicitly referred to as a marriage.<sup>2</sup>

Consider these passages:

“When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness; I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord GOD, and you became mine.”  
(Ezek. 16:8)

“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.” (Hos. 2:19–20)

We find many other references to God being married to His people. The Sinai covenant is, in effect, a wedding ceremony between Yahweh and Israel. The covenant meal that the seventy elders of Israel had in front of Yahweh after making covenant on Mount Sinai is the wedding feast confirming and celebrating the

union.<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah 2 portrays the journey of Yahweh leading Israel through the wilderness to Canaan after the exodus as being like a bridegroom who brings his bride to his home from her father’s house after the engagement.<sup>4</sup> In other places in Jeremiah, God refers to Israel as His beloved (Jer. 11:15; 12:7).

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**God makes it clear that the Israelites will belong to Him and be His people. However, they will belong to Him in a special way.**

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This covenantal phrase is often found in the Old Testament: “I will be your God and you shall be my people” (Lev. 26:12). This phrase is like the phrase said in Jewish wedding contracts: “She is my wife and I am her husband from this day and forever.”<sup>5</sup>

God’s covenant with Israel was a commitment to Israel. God makes it clear that the Israelites will belong to Him and be His people (Ex. 6:7a; Lev. 26:12). However, they will belong to Him in a special way. God will not treat His people as His property or playthings or slaves—these are all ways that other “gods” are described as treating their people. Rather, the Israelites are cherished and desired by God. They are more than objects or playthings or slaves; they are as a beloved wife to Him.

I've had the privilege of officiating at many weddings. One of my favorite parts of the ceremony is getting a front row seat when the groom first sees his bride walking down the aisle. The groom's attention is fixed on his bride. He looks on her with delight and affection, with eager anticipation for her to make her way to him so that finally they can be married and be together from that day on. That's how the Lord looks upon His people—with delight and excitement. They are His “treasured possession” (Deut. 14:2), His beloved bride that He freely and fully loves.

### **A NEW COVENANT—A NEW MARRIAGE**

There is, though, an unfortunate dark side to this marriage story: the continuing failure of Israel to be faithful to God. God was the initiating committed husband who took Israel “by the hand to bring them out of Egypt”; nevertheless, Israel soon afterward would break her covenant with Him (Jer. 31:31–32).

Throughout her history, Israel breaks her covenant by worshipping idols and the gods of the surrounding pagan nations, actions the Bible starkly describes as tantamount to committing adultery. Again, the metaphor used here is striking. Out of all the ways to describe how Israel has been uncommitted to God, the Bible uses the most severe image possible to describe Israel's sin against Him. The image of adultery doesn't allow us to think that Israel just let God down, as if Israel simply failed to do the dishes a few times. Rather, it speaks of violated intimacy and personal betrayal. It's a metaphor that reinforces just how close God considers Himself to His people. So close, that only serial adultery can describe what it is like when Israel follows other gods besides the Lord God.

Given Israel's actions, God had every right to abandon Israel, to permanently divorce her, because of her unfaithfulness to him.<sup>6</sup>

But that's not what happens. God instead recommits to Israel. He calls Israel back to Himself, even after sending her away (Jer. 3:12, 14). His desire to be in close relationship with her is so strong and enduring, He promises to find a way whereby His people can be in relationship with Him, a relationship no longer threatened by idolatrous infidelity and betrayal but instead one that endures and flourishes in righteousness and faithfulness and love (Hos. 2:19–20).

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**That God comes to us in Jesus emphasizes like nothing else the strength and fervor of God's love for us. It says that we are dearly loved by Him, that we are beloved to Him.**

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We see God follow through on this promise as we move from the Old Testament into the New Testament. The

relationship between God and His people opens up from being between God and Israel to being between God, more specifically Jesus, and the church. The coming of Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise given in Jeremiah 31:31–34. A new covenant—a new marriage—is formed, carried out, and fulfilled in Jesus as the promised Messiah who willingly gives Himself up in order to save and redeem His bride, the church (Eph. 5:25).

That God comes to us in Jesus emphasizes like nothing else the strength and fervor of God's love for us. It says that we are dearly loved by Him, that we are beloved to Him.

God in Jesus loves us so much, He assumes humanity into Himself to make it possible for us to have a relationship with Him. God in Jesus passes through the crucible of suffering, pain, and death so that we can finally have a committed relationship with Him that will actually last and endure. The following verses flesh out the metaphor.

In John 3:27–30, John the Baptist sees himself as the friend

who sets things up for Jesus, who is explicitly said to be the bridegroom coming for His bride.

Paul gives instructions on marriage in Ephesians 5:22–23, and in doing so makes clear that human marriage is ultimately a reflection of a divine reality, namely the marriage between Christ and His church. The actions of Jesus are in essence the actions of a husband who, out of love for his spouse, gives up all of himself for her sake.

Second Corinthians 11:2 tells us that the church should be like a pure virgin wife to Jesus. Jesus relates to the church and loves the church like a husband does his new wife.

And at the end of the Bible, in Revelation 19:6–9 and 21:9–11, we see that this divine relationship persists to eternity. All earthly marriages eventually end. But one marriage will endure forever, because it is a heavenly marriage. It is the marriage between the Lord and the church.

No other book of the Bible captures the full extent of God’s love for us like the Song of Songs. I used to snicker to myself when reading this book as a kid. I couldn’t believe I was actually reading such explicit language like this, let alone in a Bible that my parents had given me!

Once I became a proper seminarian, I became a more “sophisticated” exegete. I was taught to see the Song of Songs as singing the praises of human romance, as a celebration of the coming together of a man and woman in marriage.

But now, many years later, I’m seeing that there is more behind it than only human romance, for human marriages are designed to mirror heavenly marriage (Eph. 5:32). So the human marriage depicted in the Song of Songs, like all human marriages should be, is ultimately an echo and pointer to the heavenly marriage between the Lord Jesus and the church.

And what do we see about marriage in the Song of Songs? We

see commitment. Initiative. Affection and desire. Intimacy. We see love, the beloved love unique to marriage.

All of these things are reflections, echoes, signposts of what the church has in her relationship with the Lord. The Song of Songs' highly expressive description of marriage is a window into the "exclusive, eros love of God that overflows for his bride."<sup>7</sup>

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**To be known by  
God and to be  
loved by God is  
to be beloved  
to God.**

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Let's again acknowledge how strange this feels, to talk about God and Jesus in this way. To say that we are in an intimate, affectionate "marital" relationship with God? This feels like we are on the precipice of fall-

ing into the clutches of a weird cult.

But there is something important to remember here. This is not a one-to-one metaphorical analogy. Human marriages operate in the physical world, while the heavenly marriage originates and comes out of the spiritual world. So, for example, there clearly is no one-to-one equivalent of physical sexual union. We aren't talking about people one day lining up in heaven one by one to physically kiss God. As Eric Ortlund puts it, "In fact, the Song was not meant to teach that there is something sexual about God; human sexuality is a good but entirely ordinary created thing."<sup>8</sup> The love of the Lord for us that we are talking about here is holy and pure and spiritual.

That being said, the intentional mention of human marriage being ultimately about heavenly marriage is not a throwaway metaphor. Human love in marriage, with all that it entails and implies, including its intimate and romantic dimensions, really is a key way to capture what it is to be loved by God, to be beloved to Him. It is a reflection of the divine.<sup>9</sup>

It says something very real about the relationship between

us and God. As such, when we consider human marriage and all that makes up human marriage, we are seeing something that spiritually and directly connects to how we relate to God.

To be known by God and to be loved by God is to be beloved to God. It is to know, sense, and feel His love for us as a dearly loved spouse. One who loves us even unto death itself, beyond even death itself.<sup>10</sup> One who loves us with the committed, fierce, strong, intimate intensity of a beloved spouse.

All of which means then that ultimate reality—the life we are heading into and will live in together—is best understood as living with God, being married to Jesus, loving God and being loved by God forever.

I've long enjoyed playing video games. And one game I have played a lot over the years is Madden NFL. I've enjoyed it as it has been my one way of ensuring that my New York Jets win the majority of their games. When I play Madden, my Jets always end up becoming a Super Bowl champion dynasty, winning at least four years in a row. It's a real and legit thrill to me. But even I, a superfan, have to admit that it's not reality (certainly not as of this writing). The video game is enjoyable, but what I really yearn for one day is the Jets, in real life, winning games and eventually winning the Super Bowl for the first time since 1969.

### **JESUS' LOVE: A BELOVED LOVE**

This life we live now is significant and important. But even it is ultimately a temporary expression of an ensuing, enduring reality that is best described as us, united to God in Christ, living a married life with Him forever. Indeed, this life will one day be seen as a brief and passing rest stop compared to the final destination of abundant life and blessing (see 2 Cor. 4:17).

We begin married life with the Lord the moment we put our

faith in Jesus. And that moment we begin a life together with Him, that new life only grows and deepens and expands. The end of all things is not “cold dark blank space,” as Ray Ortlund writes, but instead being with “a God above with love in his eyes for us and infinite joy to offer us.”<sup>11</sup>

We can’t now fully grasp all of what this will entail. Nevertheless, it is still quite significant to know that the best life the universe offers us feels like being married to someone who intimately, deeply, and fully loves us, and will love us like that forever.

This is the life into which all believers are headed. But we can already experience some of this life now. For already, in this life, the church is the bride of Christ even as we look to and prepare for when we will officially be His bride forever . . . which means that already right now we have poured into us from God abundant love, enduring commitment, and full intimacy. Already right now we swim in God’s beloved love, flowing from God to us and eventually carrying all of us into eternity.

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**All of how we interact with one another, all of how we relate to one another, comes out of how God first related to us.**

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But now here is something to consider. This love, that flows from God to us, also flows among us. God’s beloved love for you connects you to God in His beloved love *and* it connects you to other believers in the same beloved love. We are carried together with other believers into eternity in God’s beloved love because God already today connects us together in His beloved love.

What makes us come together as the people of God and remain the people of God is what we have been given from God. We are family to one another because of God’s adopting us into His family. We are brother and sister not because we naturally

have divine DNA within us but because of what has been done for us, namely God putting us in the Son. We relate to one another not through any natural blood relations but through the spiritual blood relation that we gained through the shed blood of Jesus. It is the blood of Jesus that gives us the same spiritual DNA that makes us family.

We are a reconciled community to one another because God reconciled us to Himself. We can speak of unity among us, of being “one new man,” because of what God has given us: the body and blood of Jesus (Eph. 2:13–16). This lasts into eternity even as it echoes back into the present, and in how we relate to one another today.

All of how we interact with one another, all of how we relate to one another, comes out of how God first related to us. We see, feel, and relate to one another in and through and out of God, and specifically in and through and out of Jesus.

This has implications for how we understand what it means to love one another within the church. We love one another from and out of God’s love for us. And God loves us most distinctly and especially as a husband. He loves us with a beloved love, which means then that we love one another from and out of God’s beloved love.

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As we explore in the next chapter what it means to love one another, what we’ll be talking about is loving one another with the love of God. Since the ultimate way God loves us is with a beloved love, then we need to consider the ways in which our love for each other is like this beloved love.

For Jesus’ love at its heart is a beloved love.