

A little girl was attending her first-ever wedding. And she whispered to her mum, “Why’s the bride wearing a white dress?”

“Well, because white is the colour of happiness,” her mother explained. “And today is the happiest day of her life.”

The little girl thought about this for a moment, “So why is the groom wearing black???”ⁱ

That’s enough of the stereo-typical wedding jokes... The reason the bride wears white, is not because it’s the happiness colour. White is supposed to be a symbol of purity. It certainly used to be, and in some cases today, it still is.

We’ve spent a couple of weeks now, on the topic of “marriage”. The first week, we talked a little bit to the husbands, but mostly to the wives. And then last week, we spoke mostly to the husbands.

And the Apostle Paul finishes off by saying, “**This is a profound mystery**” – that’s the way he described the one-flesh relationship – the relationship between husbands and wives. The fact that husband and wife are joined together, and become one, is a profound mystery.... But in all of his discussion about husbands and wives, he’s actually been focused on something bigger, and that is the profound mystery of Christ and the church.

Yep, there’s been some great lessons here, for husbands – there’s some great lessons here for wives – there’s been some great pointers for making our marriages better. But even more important than any of this, is what it means for our relationship with Christ. Marriage is a living, breathing metaphor and symbol for our relationship with Christ.

Something that I've found to be true, is we can never hope to understand Christianity, until we understand the cross... The cross of crucifixion – a device for execution – has become the symbol for Christianity – the cross is central to our faith in Christ.... Why is that???

Nicki Gumball of the Alpha course, made a little electric chair to hang around his neck, and he did it to make a point, that wearing a cross, is the same thing as if we wore an electric chair, or if we wore a noose around our neck... It's turning into jewellery, a tool of execution, and yet this tool of execution, has become the symbol for Christianity....

And until we understand “Why?” – until we understand what this means, we're not going to get it – we could never fathom, what God has actually done for us.

Jesus Christ loves us so much that He sacrificed His life – He died on the cross, to save us... And it wasn't any accident, that he ended up nailed to an executioner's cross – He planned to be there. It was like He got His little GPS out and went Destination: Cross – He did it on purpose, and He had a goal in mind... It wasn't like God went “Oops! – I didn't mean that to happen!”....

Jesus died **for** the church... I've explained the church before. Don't get into your head that the church is an institution. Nor is it a building. Nor is it a denominational organisation... “The church” is a way of saying “Christians” – disciples of Jesus Christ – followers of Christ – those who would believe

in Him and follow Him, and gather together to worship Him...
That last bit's important you know – to gather together.

The Greek word, that we translate as church, is **ἐκκλησία**. It means gathering; assembly; meeting. And Jesus sacrificed Himself for the **ἐκκλησία** - for the gathered ones. It's pretty common for people these days to say "Oh, I don't have to go to church to be a Christian... What they're saying is "I'd rather not be with other Christians, but I'm still a Christian."... Well I'm just not too sure about that. The sacrifice of Christ, was for the ones who gather in His name... - for His gathered disciples.

And so Jesus died for the church:

- That He might sanctify her;
- That He might present her to himself, in splendour; and
- That He would make her to be "Holy" and "Blameless"

Let's pull these together:

What does it mean that He died to sanctify us? It says:

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word....

There's not too many weddings that begin at 8am, and there's a very good reason for that. It takes the bride hours to get ready. They have to have a shower, and go to the hair dresser and get all done up, get their make-up on, and into the dress... It's quite a procedure that most of us men could never comprehend – spending a couple of hours getting ready to go out... We don't understand it – we just enjoy the finished product...

And, I'm not too familiar with the toiletry and bathing customs of 1st century Palestine, but I'm pretty sure, that ordinary old Joe Blo (or in this case Jill Blo) would've had running water. So I imagine that baths weren't any where near as regular as what we take them for granted. Maybe they only had a bath once a week (I don't know)... But I understand that when the bride was getting ready for the groom, she would have a ceremonial bathing – never in her life-time, would she be cleaner, then when she came to be presented to the groom.

Back in the 1st century, it was a big deal to have a bath – as it is today, in areas of the world, where they don't have access to clean, regular running water...

And so the bride would be cleansed completely in water – all the built up filth and grime from days (or maybe even weeks) of daily living and daily work, would be washed away, and never would she be cleaner, than on her wedding day.

And this is the image we are given, for the church to be made holy.

To be in relationship with a Holy God, requires that **we** are holy. And this was His goal at the cross – to make us holy... Verse 26 says that He cleanses us **by the washing with water through the word...**

You know that having a bath doesn't make you holy. And the fact that Christ died on the cross, doesn't even mean that everybody in the world is automatically made holy... Anyone **can** be sanctified – anyone **can** become holy, but there has to

be this washing with water through the word. – what does that mean?

Well, it's obviously referring to baptism, but I think more so, it's referring directly to what baptism represents. Nobody was ever truly saved, by having a bit of water splashed over them, just like nobody was ever truly saved by simply being immersed in the river...

In some denominations, it is taught that provided you were baptised – it doesn't matter what you believe, or what you do with the rest of your life, you're in... Well, I'm afraid that's a load of rubbish, so don't go hanging your hopes on that one...

It certainly does matter, what we believe.**washing with water through the word** . A deep cleansing, through the word. It matters what you hear and believe – the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ – is very important...

And what is the gospel? We have all sinned. None of us meets God's standard for holiness, and so we deserve death, but Jesus took that punishment for us, and we are **justified freely by his grace**ⁱⁱ.

And this is the **amazing** thing – God chooses us – He decides to make us holy and make us His, long before we ever deserved it.

You know, it's impossible – if you know your bible really well – it's impossible to read this, without looking back to what God said through the prophet Ezekiel, hundreds of years earlier. This image of being washed and made clean – this

image of becoming the bride of Christ – goes way beyond Baptism. It is an image of how God takes those who are **un**holy, and makes them holy. It's an image of how God takes those who are **un**worthy, and makes them worthy. It's an image of how God takes those who are broken and despised, and lost and lonely, and He brings them into His love....

Let me read this little metaphor for Israel, from Ezekiel 16:

16 The word of the LORD came to me: ² "Son of man, confront Jerusalem with her detestable practices ³ and say, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says to Jerusalem: Your ancestry and birth were in the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite. (they were the baddies – you come from bad stock – you had no hope from the beginning)⁴ On the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to make you clean, nor were you rubbed with salt or wrapped in cloths. ⁵ No one looked on you with pity or had compassion enough to do any of these things for you. Rather, you were thrown out into the open field, for on the day you were born you were despised. (alright – the picture here is of Israel: unloved, neglected, filthy, wretched, pitiful, helpless)

⁶ " 'Then **I** passed by and saw you kicking about in your blood, and as you lay there in your blood **I** said to you, "Live!" ⁷ **I** made you grow like a plant of the field. You grew up and developed and became the

most beautiful of jewels. Your breasts were formed and your hair grew, you who were naked and bare.

⁸ " 'Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of **my** garment over you and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign LORD, and you became mine.

⁹ " **I** bathed you with water and washed the blood from you and put ointments on you. ¹⁰ **I** clothed you with an embroidered dress and put leather sandals on you. I dressed you in fine linen and covered you with costly garments. ¹¹ I adorned you with jewellery: I put bracelets on your arms and a necklace around your neck, ¹² and I put a ring on your nose, earrings on your ears and a beautiful crown on your head. ¹³ So you were adorned with gold and silver; your clothes were of fine linen and costly fabric and embroidered cloth. Your food was fine flour, honey and olive oil. You became very beautiful and rose to be a queen. ¹⁴ And your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty, because the splendour **I** had given you made your beauty perfect, declares the Sovereign LORD.

Can you see the connection of this image with Ephesians?

No one is worthy of God. And what a horrible image – a baby being born, and no one loves them enough to even give them a bath. And the baby is unable to bathe itself.

And that's us. Left to our own devices, we are **not** holy. We are **not** worthy... and so Christ became the sacrifice on the cross, to change all that – to **make** us holy...

There is a God who loves us, and there's the image. When He chose Israel as His bride, she was still unwashed... He made the covenant with her – He decided to love her, before she'd even had the bath, and **then** he washed her clean.

And that's what He does for us. If we wait until we've got our lives altogether before we come to Jesus, we'll never come to Him... God takes us as we are – retched; pitiful; poor; broken; filthy; steeped in sin..... And as we respond to the gospel – As we fall on our face before His throne, as the broken people that we are, He takes all that away, and makes us holy.

And so when Jesus returns, we will be presented to Him in splendour.

You might think of yourself as a bit of a disappointment, or maybe even as a monumental failure as a Christian.... Well, the cross was God's solution to all of that.

When Jesus returns, He's not going to see you the way that you think you are – He's going to see you pure and holy, washed in His blood. As we repent of our sins, He forgives us, and He takes all the filth away.

Why am I telling you this? Well, because it's important that you **know** it. Don't just feel it – **know** it. Because there's times when you **won't** feel "holy" – when you **won't** feel "sanctified"... But the fact that I don't feel it, doesn't mean that it isn't true. And so we need to **know** that we are made holy. It doesn't matter how bad you've been. It doesn't matter how evil your actions once were... In Christ, we are forgiven, and the filth is washed away.

Isn't that great??? You know, people who 'get' this, would be pretty likely to shout out "Hallelujah" at this stage...

But here's something to add to it: Jesus hasn't finished with us yet – He's still doing stuff. He nourishes the church, and he deeply and affectionately cares for the church (or He cherishes the church).

The word "nourishes" could also be translated as "rare" the church, or to nurture the church to maturity... And that's why we're all about discipleship here. When you become a Christian, that's just the beginning of your walk with Jesus.

Baby Christians need to be nourished so that they can grow. They need to be rare, and educated.

Jesus said: ^{Matthew 4:4} **'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'**

And that is so true.

If you stop eating food, you grow weak, you get sick, and eventually you die... True???

And, if you stop feeding spiritually, you'll be a weak Christian. You'll be a sick Christian. And eventually your faith will die...

And nobody else might care about you, but Christ certainly does. He feeds us, but we've got to eat. Don't be like an anorexic Christian – do you know what I mean??? – Someone who just doesn't want to eat spiritual food... Christ feeds us, and we've got to eat.

How does He feed us? Well, He feeds us through His word, as we read our bibles, and go to bible studies. He feeds us when we draw near to Him in prayer – not just talking to Him, but listening. He feeds us by filling us with His Holy Spirit. And He feeds us when we fellowship with other disciples of Christ. He feeds us as we gather together in worship, and share in communion.

I guess the teaching ministry, is big for me. I reckon it's so important to be fed from God's word, and that's why I keep dishing it up.

Do you know you're cherished? What a wonderful feeling, to be so deeply loved by someone, that you would use the word "cherished" to describe it... and that's how Christ feels about the ecclesia – about the church – about disciples who gather together to worship Him...

Before Christ picked you up, and washed you clean, you may never have even known what love was... but now, we are cherished, by the God who saved us.

Bask in that for a moment – the knowledge that you are cherished by Christ Jesus

Amen.

ⁱ Readers Digest – Laughter, the best medicine. Readers Digest – Canada, 1998. P.19

ⁱⁱ Romans 3: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.