

CELEBRATION PREPARATION

A Sermon on Revelation 19:6-9

by Anthony Carter

Certain times of the year are always dear to me because they remind me of growing up in my mother's house. Perhaps no time conjures up more pleasant memories than Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving in my mother's house was such a joyous time because it was filled with food, family, and fun.

My mother is a cook *par excellence*. She is never more happy than when she hears the joyous sounds of friends and family gathering around a feast she has prepared. I have only know her as a cooking woman. And during the Thanksgiving season she was at her finest. Whether it was turkey, ham, baked beans, fresh greens, dressing, corn-on-the-cob, or apple and sweet potato pie, she always seemed to exceed our expectations. It seems that feasting always accompanied times of celebration. The reason there was so much food was due in large part to the number of people in our family.

I come from a rather large family. My father and mother had nine kids. And most of them had their fair share of children. Consequently, whenever we got together the food was only an appetizer to the abundant overflow of loving and laughter. So Thanksgiving brings to mind the great fun we had during that season.

In my childhood, as in the lives of millions around the country, Thanksgiving also became associated with football. And man, did we love football! My brother and I would get up on Thanksgiving morning and play football in the yard. By noon, the football games were on TV. Then we would eat the meal of the year and watch more football. By the evening we were ready to go back outside and play more football. For a young boy growing up in rural Michigan, nothing was more fun than playing and watching football — and Thanksgiving weekend was nothing if not a long weekend of football and feasting. It was one long party. From these joyous occasions I have grown to enjoy a good party. Interestingly, a survey of the people of God throughout biblical history reveals a people who were given to celebration. Yet in our time conservative Christianity has lost it's sense of celebration.

Unfortunately, in our society bible-believing Christianity has come to be associated with ankle-length dresses, dark coats and ties, and an overall bland and somber approach to life. We tend to live by such anecdotes as “don't drink, don't smoke, don't chew, and don't go out with girls who do.” It has been said, and

sadly too often truly, that Christians don't party, and in some measure we deserve this infamy.

Christians have often erroneously led the way in such social agendas as the prohibitions against drinking, dancing, smoking, etc. These actions have caused us to be characterized as people against fun, festivity, and the love of life itself. As a witness to the faithfulness of Scripture and the life-giving God we serve, we need to recapture a sense of festivity. We need to learn how to party once again. We need to learn how to celebrate and enjoy life and all that God has given us (1 Tim. 6:17). Why, do you ask? If for no other reason than as a precursory reflection of eternity. That's right, our eternal destination could be summed in this: It will be party time!

Even a cursory reading of the Scriptures will reveal the people of God, both Israel and ultimately the church, were a festive people. In fact it seemed that Israel had a feast for every occasion. Their festivals are legendary. The Feast of the Passover and Unleavened Bread celebrated Israel's deliverance from Egypt (Exod. 12:1ff.). The Feast of Tabernacles celebrated the harvest and vintage (Deut. 16:13). The Feast of Trumpets consecrated the seventh month as a sabbatical month (Lev. 23:23). The Feast of Firstfruits celebrated the first harvest (Lev. 23:9ff.). The Feast of Pentecost celebrated the dedication of the harvest (Lev. 23:15ff.). The Feast of Purim commemorated the defeat of Haman and the salvation of Israel (Esther 9:20ff.). These festivals and many others are indicative of the fact that Israel was a nation given to celebration. And when they celebrated, the laughs were loud, the food was fabulous, the jukebox was jumping, and the wine was wet. When Christ came, the festivities did not cease.

When Jesus began his public ministry, he appeared to be very fond of celebration. Indeed, we often find him at the center of the party. I find it no coincidence that our Lord's first recorded miracle occurred at a wedding feast (John 2:1-11). Surely it was nothing short of a party, even a festival, there by the Sea of Galilee where Jesus turned two small fish and five loaves of bread into a feast for upwards of 5,000 (John 6:1-14). So fond it seems was our Lord for joyous gatherings that his antagonists accused him of being a drunkard and a glutton (Matt. 11:18). From these instances and others I would say it is safe to infer that Christ not only brought joy to people, but likewise enjoyed joyful people. The celebrations in Israel were yearly events and engendered high expectations. But no celebration in Israel was more common or anticipated than a wedding celebration.

Similar to our day, weddings in Israel were significant events to families. Much preparation and care were given to the wedding ceremony. In fact, it was not

simply a one-day affair. Often the planning of the event would start when the two intended were betrothed to one another as children. The ceremony itself was preceded by festivities that often lasted as long as seven days. Again the wine flowed plentifully. The laughter was non-stop and the food was abundant. The music and the people overflowed into the streets. Can you imagine such a celebration? It was like homecoming, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and a birthday all thrown in together. I submit that we need to begin imagining such a celebration because heaven itself is compared to such an occasion.

The Proposal

The history of redemption could be seen as a dating period. God was courting his people throughout the Old Testament in an attempt to prepare them for his Son. This courtship, like most courtships, had its ups and downs, but proved to be worth the time and effort, for ultimately God made the final proposal for marriage with the coming of Christ. When Christ came it was in one sense a proposal for marriage. He came giving himself to be wed. He came as a bridegroom prepared to meet his bride and to give himself for her.

Throughout redemptive history the metaphor of marriage vividly expressed the relationship between God and his people. We find this expressed in Isaiah 54:5: “For your Maker is your husband”; and Hosea 2:20: “I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness.” Israel was prefigured as the wife of God, and was thus granted a privileged relationship. Yet, with the advent of Christ, the picture is made even clearer. He came in fulfillment of the relationship God had established with Israel. He is revealed as the eternal bridegroom, and the church, comprised of both Jew and Gentile, is the eternal bride. Yet it appears that Jesus did not select the fittest of brides.

Apparently, our Lord took to heart the words of the whimsical tune, “If you want to be happy for the rest of your life / never make a pretty woman your wife.” The bride which Christ came to receive was not lovely to behold. According to 1 Corinthians 1:26, she was not the most noble, nor the most wise. She was not the most beautiful, or the most gracious. In fact, she was battered and scared. She was abused and misused. She had squandered her innocence and pawned her virtue. She had played the harlot and now was unwanted. Yet, Christ looked not at what she was, but beheld her in light of what she would be. Knowing all this he gave himself for her — the righteous for the unrighteous; the lovely for the unlovely; the just for the unjust (1 Pet. 3:18). He paid the bridal price and betrothed himself to her for all eternity. Where before she was unworthy, now she is worthy. Where she was unclean, now she is clean. Where she was unlovely, now she is lovely.

Whereas we were once nobody, not a people, now we are somebody; we are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of God's own choosing. Now we must reflect our worthiness and his glory (1 Pet. 2:9-10). We must note here, however, that Christ did not come just for any bride he could get. The beauty and the awesome wonder of it all is that he had a specific bride in mind.

Christ did not come in hope of securing a bride. He did not simply throw out a proposal to a dying world and hope someone would accept. Instead, the eternal plan of God was for a specific bride (Matt. 1:21; John 6:37-39) that had been chosen from eternity (Eph. 3:4ff.). Beloved, We are among those for whom Christ came and gave himself to be wed. And as the intended of Christ, we must be busy preparing ourselves.

The Engagement

Prior to our Lord's ascension, he frequently promised to return for his bride. Yet until that day when our wedding is confirmed, we are to be actively living out the reality of our engagement. Like any girl espoused to be wed, we are to prepare diligently for our coming wedding. Whereas we may not be seeking something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue, we nevertheless are to be diligently watching and working for our groom's sudden return (Matt. 25:1-13; Mark 13:32-37). We are not to be passively waiting for the glorious appearing of our Blessed Hope (Tit. 2:13), but we are to pursue actively our Lord's return by preparing our wedding garment. That's right, our active obedience to the things of God is integral to the fullness of our wedding dress.

Our passage reminds us that the garment for which we have been fitted and which we will display in eternity is of "fine linen, clean and bright" (Rev. 19:8). It is not the gaudy, pretentious dress of the mother of harlots, but rather the clean, pure dress of celestial glory. It is the outward manifestation of inward virtue. It is, without doubt, "the righteous works of the saints" which God prepared eternally for us to perform (Eph. 2:10). This active obedience and expectation should be reflected in all that we do. Every aspect of our worship should reflect this reality.

For example, when we come to the Lord's Table, we are celebrating our engagement and our coming wedding. We taste the bitterness of the cup and reflect upon the sacrifice of our Lord as He came to redeem us and pay the price for our ransom. Also, we taste the sweetness of the cup, and it reminds us that our full redemption is nigh in the sweet return of our heavenly groom.

The songs we sing should reflect this expectancy. We should joyfully sing such songs as “I’m Going Up Yonder.” We must rejoice with Horatio Spafford when he writes:

*And Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight;
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll.
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend
Even so, it is well with our soul.*

But perhaps my favorite of all, in this respect, similarly states:

*The angels shall sound the shout of His coming.
The sleeping shall rise from their slumbering place.
Those that remain shall be changed in a moment.
And we shall behold Him face to face.*

Also, the sermons we preach must be indicative of our expectancy. This is illustrated for us time and time again as the writers of the epistles frequently told us to remember our Lord’s return. Peter reminds us that our life is dissolving with all that is associated with it. But we believe the promises of God and look for a new heaven and a new earth (2 Pet. 3:10-13). John teaches us that what we see now is not all there is, but when our Lord is revealed, we shall be like Him and we shall see Him as He is (1 John 3:2). And surely the words of Paul are a source of encouragement and hope when he writes:

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words (1 Thess. 4:16-18).

Finally, our lives should be lived in light of this hope. We should be proclaiming to a lost world, “Our Bridegroom cometh!” Our lives should speak loudly and clearly that “our Lord God Omnipotent reigns!” For we have been told that he will not come until we are ready (1 Pet. 3:9). For when he comes he comes for a complete bride, adorned and full of beauty. His church will be filled. He will not settle for 99%, but He must have them all (John 6:39-40). Yet, perhaps the most important truth communicated to us concerning our groom’s return is that we, through diligent and faithful living, can hasten His return (2 Pet. 3:11-12).

The Consummation

The final glorious stage of this grand drama will come at the consummation of this wedding. Again, our passage reminds us that the wedding feast is being prepared for that grand day when the Groom shall return and his bride will be ready, adorned in her magnificent wedding garment. It will be the Lord's Day, but it will be our day as well, for we are the bride.

The wedding day is one of the most anticipated days in a woman's life. Her eyes fill with glee and a joyful expectancy as she considers the day of her nuptials. She pictures thousands in attendance as she glides down the aisle. The tapestry of her gown is elegantly woven together. The train of her dress exemplifies the glory of her moment. She has never felt more welcomed or beautiful. Joy and warmth envelope all in attendance as she steps down the aisle toward the anxious arms of her awe-struck groom. So is the scene more intensified when Christ welcomes his bride down the aisle of eternity. For the host of heaven will draw near and the sound of innumerable voices will break forth singing, "Alleluia! The Lord God omnipotent reigns." Beloved, we must understand that we are not simply going to a wedding feast, we are the ones for whom the wedding feast is prepared. But what shall be our state in this eternal marriage to Christ?

I can hardly venture a speculation into such wondrous things. But I am confident in saying that the ecstasy a man and woman experiences on the night of their wedding as they consummate their love pales in comparison to the eternal intimate bliss we will experience as we consummate our union with Him, our glorious Bridegroom, throughout all eternity.

Beloved, we are the central element in this grand drama of redemption that is culminating in this eternal wedding feast. So let us take to celebrating! May the Church of Christ be filled with the anticipatory joy of eternity, and may our lives here be a preparation for celebration.