

Series: The Mystery and the Masterpiece
March 12, 2017
Message Two:

The Passion and the Picture

Ephesians 5:31-32; Ezekiel 16

Intro: Gene Edwards wrote a book, *The Divine Romance*, Edwards imagines God watching Moses beginning to lead the people out of Egypt into the desert:

The fleeing refugees were coming into clear focus now. He could make out Moses in the lead...t he cattle and sheep, even the vague outline of his people. He stared at this moving mass of humanity until the image before him blurred and began to change in form and, finally, become but one person. His eyes now saw not a multitude of people, but only a lovely young girl, coming up from Egypt, crossing the hot sands, and moving toward him. "She will be here by evening. Soon she will enter the land I have promised to her. There she will reach full womanhood. I have waited since before eternity. I have created the whole reaches of the cosmos for but this one Purpose.

"I wonder...I wonder. Will she learn to love me?"

This longing for God to have His bride continues throughout the prophets:

Isaiah 54:5 - For your Creator will be your husband; the LORD of Heaven's Armies is his name! He is your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, the God of all the earth.

Hosea 2:19–20 - I will make you my wife forever, showing you righteousness and justice, unfailing love and compassion. I will be faithful to you and make you mine, and you will finally know me as the LORD.

God as the Husband, Israel as the bride in the Old Covenant; and Christ as the bridegroom, the church as the bride in the New Covenant—these are not illustrations of our marriages.

It was God's intention for our marriages and the institution of marriage to be the illustration of a greater reality: Christ as our Husband, us as His bride.

Our sexual activity within the holiness of marriage is a picture of Christ the Bridegroom entering into His bride, leaving part of Himself (the Holy Spirit), and giving us new life. This is why making love within marriage is worship as we explained last week. The married couple is reflecting the love between Christ and His people.

Matthew 1:25 - But he [Joseph] did not have sexual relations with her [Mary] until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus.

The original Greek word in that verse for *sexual relations* is *ginosko*, which means “to know absolutely.”²

In a later place Matthew describes people who think they are in a relationship with Jesus but aren't. He quotes Jesus as saying,

Matthew 7:23 - But I will reply, “I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God's laws.”

The Greek word here for *knew* is *ginosko*—the same word used for intercourse in Matthew 1:25.³ He is saying, “We were never intimate. We were never joined together as one.”

The Bible again bears out the teaching that our sexual relations are to be a picture of God's relationship with us—exclusive (one way to God), eternal (God doesn't divorce us), and God paints this picture for us in the intimate relations of a man and wife. Our sexual relationships in the purity of heterosexual marriage are acts of worship displaying the great love God has for us.

When Paul discusses communion, he also uses a word that has more than one ultimate meaning.

1 Corinthians 10:16 KJV - The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?

The Greek word translated *communion* is *koinonia*, which literally translated means “partnership, participation, (social) intercourse... communion.”⁴

In communion, we are taking Christ into us - becoming one with Him. He is the Husband. The church is the bride. We receive Him into us, and the original languages use words that describe this beautiful picture. Paul quotes Genesis in his explanation of this great mystery:

Ephesians 5:31–32 ESV - Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

Marriage is a covenant, and the sexual act of consummating this covenant is an act of passionate worship because it is the greatest illustration God has given us of the oneness, union, and communion that He desires with us.

Michael Lawrence is quoted in *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ*:

“Now if marriage is a covenant, then that covenant must have a sign, something that makes visible the invisible reality of this one-flesh union. This is the way all covenants work in the Bible. When God covenants with all of creation not to destroy the world again by flood, he puts the rainbow in the sky as a sign. When God covenants with repenting sinners in the New Covenant, he gives us the sign of baptism, in which he visibly portrays the invisible reality of our being buried with Christ, being cleansed from sin, and being raised to newness of life in Christ. And so it is with the covenant of marriage. Once married, a man relates to every other woman in the world as if she were his sister or his mother—people you don’t have sex with. He relates to this one woman as his wife, uniting to her in a one-flesh relationship of mutual love, loyalty, and intimacy. The sign of that unique covenant relationship is the physical act of becoming one flesh in sexual intercourse.

“What this means is that the intimacy and pleasure of sex is not the reward we receive for getting married. That would be like saying baptism is the reward we receive for becoming a Christian. No, sex is the sign of the marriage covenant itself. And to engage in sex is to call God as witness to hold us accountable for our covenantal commitment. So regardless of whether it makes sense to our culture or to our bodies to reserve sex for marriage, and regardless of whatever lesser commitments we have made to a woman, as Christians we must realize that having sex outside of marriage makes a mockery of the covenant God instituted and to which he is witness.”⁵

When I came to understand this, it has helped me in practical ways to make my own marriage better. As with most men, there have been times when my desire for my wife sexually was greater than her desire for me. Studies show this is the case with most marriages.

I wondered why God made us this way. Was it a test? Surely he doesn’t get pleasure from frustrating us! This diversity of passion and desire becomes a point of tension in many marriages.

In frustration, like many men, I could badger my wife. I could beg her and remind her that studies show that two to three times a week is the normally accepted rate of intercourse between a husband and wife. I could remind her that she needs to satisfy me and meet my needs. Some Christian men will even quote Paul and use his words as a weapon against their wives in this battle:

1 Corinthians 7:3 - The husband should fulfill his wife's sexual needs, and the wife should fulfill her husband's needs.

None of the above strategies really work to increase passion and desire on her part! But when I put my sexual life with my wife into the context of my role being that of Christ and her role being that of the church, what

does this teach me? If I want sexual relations with my wife more often than she does, of what is that a picture? If we are biologically wired this way, why did God do this? Just to frustrate us? Is this just another temptation to make us stronger?

When I asked these questions of the Lord in prayer, the answer that came to my mind was this, “I want you more than you want Me!” My wanting to make love to my wife more than she wants me is a picture of this: Jesus wants me more than I want Him! Jesus wants to have intimate time with me much more than I want or have time for Him! The Holy Spirit is nudging me to turn off the TV, quit watching that sports program, and spend some quality time with the Lord; but my entertainment is more important, I’m too busy, I’m more interested in other things...or I have a headache!

He wants us more than we want Him.

So, how should this transform my behavior? If I desire my wife more than she desires me, does Jesus badger me into coming to Him? No, He waits for me. He loves me. He gently woos me. He sends His Holy Spirit to breathe on me and draw me to Him. That is the pattern I should use for winning my wife—not using statistics or the Scripture as a weapon just to “get my due.”

Also along these lines, we are told that in general men are aroused by sight much more than women. Why is that? Why is it that just the sight of a woman’s body can cause a man to think about sex?

Zechariah 2:8 NIV - Whoever touches you touches the apple of his eye...

Our Groom in this New Covenant views His bride with great longing, great love, and great desire for intimate relationship. This is why we discipline ourselves to keep this desire in marriage – because we have been commissioned to portray this picture!

I’m convinced that every aspect of our sexual lives is a pattern to show this picture. If you give it some thought, you just might see that it makes sense, and it just might help you in your own marriage and sexual life!

Our Desire for Intimate Connection Is a Reflection of God’s Desire for Us

Michael Lawrence⁶ - *“Inside marriage, sex is like a good steak dinner. It not only tastes good, but it is good for you and builds up a marriage. Outside of marriage, sex is like candy. It may taste good, but it does not last, and a steady diet of it will make you sick—sick in your soul and sick in your relationships...”*

When we see sexuality and the marriage relationship as more than just an outdated moral ethic but rather as a picture God design to be a pattern for the kind of relationship He desires with us as His bride, it clarifies so many things. As we study this, we also begin to see this is real truth expressed throughout the Bible from beginning to end. We miss it because it's often found in passages we never read. Maybe we don't think they are inspirational or uplifting passages. They are passages that we've not thought easy to understand. Some of the passages are so sexually graphic that pastors are fearful of publicly reading them on a Sunday morning, not to mention teaching from them. Yet if we accept the whole Bible as the Word of God (which I do), then there is a reason God included these passages. Scripture shows us God's strong desire to have deeply intimate relationships with people.

One of these sections of Scripture is found in **Ezekiel 16**. In Ezekiel's time, the Jewish people had turned away from their relationship with God. They were no longer living by the covenant He made with them. They worshipped pagan gods such as Baal and Asherah as described in last week. The worship activities to these false gods involved engaging in all kinds of sexual practices. It was considered part of the worship. God called Ezekiel to speak to His people in an effort to win them back. The message he gives is powerful and provocative, but not noticed very much today.

I'm not going to read every verse in the chapter today – but I encourage you to read it. Some of the content may surprise you because this passage of Scripture is seldom discussed. Read it for yourself.

In the first five verses God tells Ezekiel to confront the people with their “detestable sins.” He compares their birth as a nation to the birth of a child that was abandoned after delivery. Unwashed, no one to care for it, the baby was “unwanted, dumped in a field and left to die.”

From the biblical standpoint, every person is born into sin (Romans 3:23). There is a curse upon all of us from the beginning. We come into this world without God. Our spirits need to be joined with His Spirit or we have no hope. Our spiritual condition is that of great need such as the baby in this story.

In verse six the Lord says,

“But I came by and saw you there, helplessly kicking about in your own blood.” – Ezekiel 16:6

He speaks of His compassion as He caused the child to live and thrive. He describes the child as a female who grew up to be very beautiful.

“Your breasts became full, and your body hair grew, but you were still naked.” - Ezekiel 16:7

He describes how when the child was old enough for love, He took His cloak and put it on the girl to cover her nakedness and declared His marriage vows to her. He made a covenant with her, and she became His.

The Jewish people were the bride of God!

Isaiah 62:4 - Your new name will be ... “The Bride of God,” for the LORD delights in you and will claim you as his bride.

Now, under the New Covenant, the followers of Christ make up His bride!

Ephesians 5:25–27 - For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God’s word. He did this to present her to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Instead, she will be holy and without fault.

This illustration runs all through the Bible. In fact, the marriage relationship described in the Bible is the primary illustration throughout its pages of God’s desired relationship with humanity. Once you begin to see it, it is overriding. This message permeates God’s Word. You can’t get away from it. You will begin to see it everywhere.

Like Ezekiel’s description of Jerusalem, God found us in our mess—and He brought us into His family as His bride! He loves us! He cares for us!

Ezekiel 16

In Ezekiel 16:9–14, God describes how He bathed her, washed off her blood, and rubbed fragrant oils into her skin. He gave her extravagant gifts of fine clothes and jewelry made of gold and silver. Nothing was too good for her! She looked like a queen, and that’s what she was, because she was the bride of the King! Before long, she was famous throughout the world for her beauty.

God made the Jewish people one of the greatest nations on the face of the earth at the time. Jerusalem had been just a dusty crossroads before God gave it to David and Solomon to be the capital for His people. The nation became His great nation, to be a shining city on a hill through which He could show the world how much He loves people and wants to bless them.

He has also given us wonderful gifts- the fruit of the Spirit, the gifts of the Spirit, and fellowship with Him. He has renewed and restored that

which was lost from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3) & has promised full restoration.

Ezekiel's story to this point reminds me of John Mark McMillan's song, *How He Loves* -

*He is jealous for me, Loves like a hurricane, I am a tree,
Bending beneath the weight of his wind and mercy.
When all of a sudden, I am unaware of these afflictions
eclipsed by glory,
And I realize just how beautiful You are,
And how great Your affections are for me.
And oh, how He loves us so...
We are His portion and He is our prize,
Drawn to redemption by the grace in His eyes,
If grace is an ocean, we're all sinking.
So Heaven meets earth like a sloppy wet kiss
And my heart turns violently inside of my chest,
I don't have time to maintain these regrets,
When I think about, the way ...
He loves us,
Oh! how He loves us...⁷*

God's love for people is this passionate, intense love described by Ezekiel & this song. He wants to lavish us with His love, and He wants us to relish in receiving it.

In verse fifteen of Ezekiel's message, the story begins to change. The people thought they had achieved fame and beauty on their own. God describes His people's rejection of Him to turn to other gods as that of a bride rejecting her husband to become a prostitute. She took the beautiful gold and silver jewelry He had given to her and made statues of the false gods. She took her clothes to dress the idols and used the oil to burn incense to them in worship.

The statues that were made were actually of a sexual nature. Ancient pagan worship was filled with images of nude women and statues depicting the male sexual organ. These idols still exist in many cultures. They can be found as Ezekiel describes, covered in gold and silver, and used in worship that involves sexual activity.

If we see that the sexual relationship between a man and a woman in the covenant of marriage is an illustration of the relationship God wants to have with us, then we see this and any other sexual activity outside of that marriage covenant as distorting God's picture! A proper sexual relationship between a man and a woman in the covenant of marriage is a picture of our worship relationship with God. All other sexual activity reflects a picture of idolatry, which is spiritual prostitution against God.

Ezekiel speaks of a woman taking the gifts of clothing that her husband had given her to throw over adulterous lovers and her idols of perversion. This is God's view that all our actions against Him—all that comes between us and our relationship with Him—is like prostitution. He loved us. He made us. He gave us everything we have. Every time we put something ahead of Him, we are prostituting ourselves to that thing. It grieves His heart because He loves us so!

The story continues in verses twenty through twenty-two with God referring to children that had come from His union with the Jewish people. He says that she took their sons and daughters and sacrificed them to these false gods. Prostitution alone was not enough. Children were slaughtered by being sacrificed to idols. This actually happened in Israel. Their kings and queens led the way, sacrificing their own children as offerings to pagan deities and throwing them into sacrificial fires.

What is happening today to children all over the world? Many are sacrificed for convenience before they are even born. Millions who live are sold into sex slavery.

If you have personally experienced abortion, He still loves you so much! There is great grace that covers all our sin—and there is hope!

God's grace is deeper than the ocean, wider than the sea, and higher than the sky. All we have to do is confess that we have sinned and turn away from it. His forgiveness is full, free, and immediate. But as Ezekiel's story continues, we see that God loves us enough to warn us of the consequences of continuing to run away from Him.

He describes great sorrow that comes to the people for continually offering themselves to other gods as a prostitute continues to offer herself to an unending stream of men. There are never enough to bring true satisfaction to the heart.

Ezekiel's story is more than an illustration. Their worship of false gods involved sexual perversion all over Jerusalem and throughout the nation. God saw that they were no longer relying on Him for their security. They "got in bed" with other nations who gave them even more ways to reject God's love. They entered into national agreements with their enemies for the sake of peace and protection. To God, this was prostitution against Him. He wanted to be their sole source of provision and security. He wanted to be their only Lover.

He said in verse thirty, "What a sick heart you have...to do such things as these, acting like a shameless prostitute." In fact, He says they were worse than a prostitute—they stopped even asking for payment. He describes them specifically as an

“adulterous wife who takes in strangers instead of her own husband. Prostitutes charge for their services... You give gifts to your lovers, bribing them to come and have sex with you” – Ezekiel 16:32-33

At this point the people are continuing in sin without receiving any earthly benefit from it. Do you think your sin is small? Do you think any sin is small? Do you think the sins in your heart are hidden? Do you think God doesn't notice? Do you think He is not grieved when you leave your love relationship with Him on the shelf for something else?

In verses thirty-five through forty-one, God begins to describe His judgment in terms that continue along lines of sexual reference, because when our sex lives are practiced as He designed, we are a reflection of the relationship He wants with us. As God uses sexual terms and gave us sex to know the reality of relationship with Him in a deeper way, He keeps the theme uniform when describing our lives without a relationship with Him.

He again refers to Israel as a prostitute. He describes His people as pouring out their lust on other lovers. His judgment is to gather the enemy nations with whom she has aligned (the lovers with whom they have slept) and strip her naked in front of them. The reality is that God strips the Jewish people of their military strength so that they will be overcome as a nation. He pronounces that they will be punished for their murder and adultery. They will be covered with blood and destroyed. The enemy will strip them of their jewels (taking the nation's wealth). This is the only way they will ever have a chance to understand the depth of their rejection of God's love and wake up to the opportunity to be restored to Him.

This is exactly what happened to the Jewish people. Babylon came in and finished the job. They were destroyed – America seems to be on the same track -

Why am I teaching this? Because God designed the sexual relationship to be between a man and a woman in covenant as the illustration of the kind of relationship He wants with us. So when His people forsook Him, involving themselves in sexual practices outside of God's picture along with their worship of pagan gods, He used these descriptions of His pain over them leaving Him. He also speaks of the pain they would have as a result.

Every sexual activity we are involved in is either an illustration of the relationship God planned to have with us, or a distortion of the picture God designed.

Is your life a representation of His picture? Or are you thinking you can improve upon His masterpiece? Are you painting something else by the way you live your life? The sexual practices of humanity outside of that

described in God's Word is a change from what He planned. I will repeat the theme of this series:

Worship Team return cue:

Sexual relations are designed by God to be within marriage between a man and a woman as an illustration to us of His relationship with us.

This is the mystery and the masterpiece. This is the message of marriage.

Any sexual activity outside of this plan alters the picture and shows a different picture.

The story of Ezekiel 16 begins to come to a conclusion with God saying that His people had sunk so deep into sin they made Sodom appear to be righteous – and Sodom was destroyed for their blatant sexual sins!

Even after this description of the people breaking God's heart by their deep rejection of Him, God promises that He will eventually restore them. Though they broke their vows, He will make a New Covenant, and there will be opportunity for complete forgiveness.

No matter how great the sin and falling, there is still the opportunity for forgiveness! The city of Jerusalem was still smoldering from its destruction due to this rejection of God when Jeremiah wrote these words:

Lamentation 3:21–27 - Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: The faithful love of the LORD never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning. I say to myself, 'The LORD is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in him!' The LORD is good to those who depend on him, to those who search for him. So it is good to wait quietly for salvation from the LORD. And it is good for people to submit at an early age to the yoke of his discipline.

Today, we have the opportunity to receive this grace in spite of our many sins. Anyone can be forgiven no matter how they have rejected God. Forgiveness and a restored relationship with God are possible because Jesus Christ, God's Son, died on the cross as the punishment for our sins. He took our punishment for us. We were the abandoned child whom He found kicking in our own blood. We were the child who grew up to be loved by Him and then to reject Him. We are the bride who sinned against Him. His death on the cross was the price He paid to become our Groom.

Salvation –

Prayer for forgiveness from sexual sin –

Growth Track Step 2 - Finding Freedom

Prayer for marriages –

¹ (Edwards, 1984, 1982, pp. 55-56)

² (Strong, 1998)

³ (Strong, 1998)

⁴ (Strong, 1998)

⁵ (Piper, 2005, pp. 37-38)

⁶ (Piper, 2005, p. 141)

⁷ (McMillan, 2005)