

The Crystallization

The Matured Bride Who Loves the Lord's Appearing

Christ spoke repeatedly of His coming again, often using symbols such as lightning, vultures, and virgins. As the Son of Man who is sitting at the right hand of God, He comes secretly as a thief in the clouds, and He then appears publicly as the sun. Loving the Lord's appearing is a proof that we love the Lord and live for Him today.

If we are going to know the prophecy concerning the consummation of this present age, we need to know the truth concerning the four "sevens." The first "seven" is the last seven years of this age, spoken of as the last week of the seventy weeks in Daniel 9. The three other sets of "sevens" are in the book of Revelation. They are the seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. Revelation may be considered as a book of prophecy constituted with these three sets of "sevens." The first "seven" in Daniel 9 is related to these three sets of "sevens" in Revelation. The prophecy of these four "sevens" is related to the Messiah (Christ), the nation of Israel, the New Testament believers, and the church. The Lord's coming begins before the great tribulation with the rapture of the overcoming believers and concludes after the great tribulation with the Lord's visible appearing, at which time the majority of the believers will be raptured. At this juncture every eye will see Him.

In His speaking on the Mount of Olives, the Lord provided key eschatological markers that enable His seekers to soberly discern the approaching end of this present age. In response to this speaking, the Lord's lovers and servants should cooperate with Him, especially by prayer and by the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom to further God's need, desire, and economy.

The unbelievers, the religious, and the seeking believers in Christ all have implicit and explicit assumptions concerning the coming of Christ. The unbelievers "believe" that there is no Christ—hence, no coming of Christ. Therefore, they derivatively and implicitly assume that there are no future consequences to them beyond the termination of their present human life in this age. Hence, to this category of humankind, the Lord's coming will be a totally unpleasant surprise. The religious have a generally consistent and often explicit acknowledgment and expectation mixed with fear that Christ will come visibly and objectively. However, those in this category may not recognize the urgency of the time frame and are only vaguely cognizant concerning the preparedness that is needed and of the consequences of not being ready. In contrast, the seeking, faithful, and prudent believers in Christ expectantly anticipate the Lord's coming. While they wait,

they actively cooperate with the Lord by loving Him and growing in Him unto maturity. Such faithful and prudent believers likely recognize both the individual and corporate responsibility of the overcomers—to grow and mature in life and to build up the church as the Body of Christ and as the testimony of Jesus.

Revelation 19:7 explicitly states that the wife of the Lamb "has made herself ready." However, the realization that the preparation of the bride is an indispensable requisite to the Lord's return is largely missing in eschatological discourse. Furthermore, there is significant confusion concerning the identity of the bride, the qualifications to be part of her, and the process through which she is prepared. Most commentators on Revelation 19:7 consider the bride to be the church in general. Such an interpretation often leads to the erroneous teaching that participation in the bride requires no further qualification than being eternally saved through faith in the Lord Jesus.

The bride must be a composition of overcoming believers, those who have cooperated with God to grow in Christ's life unto maturity. Their living yields abundant fruit of righteousness, which becomes the qualification for their attendance at the wedding feast. The bride here consists of those believers who continually partake of the divine life and nature for their growth in life in the present age. They also grow and mature to be the overcomers who conquer the degradation of the church and build up the church as the testimony of Jesus. Thus, they become the wife of the Lamb as the consummation of God's full salvation.

The Bible unveils a holy romance of a universal couple—God in Christ as the Bridegroom and the aggregate of His elect as the corporate bride. This divine romantic love story is first marvelously revealed in the Old Testament through typology, which issues in its own spiritual fulfillment revealed in the New Testament. Paul's Epistles show a progressive romance of Christ and His believers with a view to preparing for a future wedding. Today the believers are betrothed, engaged, to Christ; hence, they belong to Him. However, the believers are not yet married to Him, for their marriage entails a complete union with Him.

The perfect counterpart of Christ is not produced by an instantaneous, judicial, outward event; instead, the church must undergo a gradual, organic, inward process in which she sheds every trace of the natural life and every vestige of the old man and is made wholly new—as new as the New

Jerusalem. When this process is complete the Lord can present the church to Himself as His counterpart. The mournful scarcity of such sanctified believers not only accounts for the delay of the Lord's return but also suggests that only a remnant among the believers—namely, the overcomers, who represent the church—are willing to pay the price to be utterly separated from the world and to be thoroughly saturated with the holy nature of God so that they may be the holy, glorious, and blameless wife of Christ.

The woeful lesson of the church in Ephesus is that leaving the first love for the Lord is the intrinsic source of the failure of the church. Numerous believers separate themselves from the new covenant ministry that causes them to love the Lord and enjoy Him as their life supply; thus, they became corrupted from the simplicity and purity toward Christ, their one Husband, and thereby are led astray from partaking of Christ as the tree of life.

The degradation of the church, which crept in as early as Paul's time and was diagnosed directly by the Lord Jesus in Revelation 2 and 3, is a great frustration but not an insuperable barrier to the Lord's carrying out the divine economy to prepare His bride. Since the Old Testament times, even when the greater part of His people forsook Him, God has had a way to accomplish His purpose by operating through a remnant of His people.

The building of the church as a spiritual temple by the overcomers, who finish this work on behalf of the whole of God's people, will usher in the Lord's second coming. Therefore, the wedding feast, the marriage dinner, is a reward to the faithful remnant of overcomers who pave the way for Christ's return.

Although the promise of reward or discipline is surely a strong incentive for the believers, the primary import of the overcomers being approved in the day of judgment is their contribution to the readiness of the bride. Were it not for the accumulated righteousnesses of such believers through their Christ-expressing life and their Christ-ministering service, the bride would not have a wedding garment.

There are at least nine crucial qualifications of the overcomers that constitute them to be the bride ready for marriage: (1) they are the reproduction of the overcoming Lamb; (2) they are mature in life; (3) they have been built as a corporate entity; (4) they are clothed in fine linen, the righteousnesses of the saints; (5) they are prudent virgins; (6) they love the Lord as their first love; (7) they desire the Lord's coming and the salvation of sinners; (8) they have the name of God, Christ's new name, written upon them; and (9) they have the name of the New Jerusalem written upon them. These qualifications of the overcomers as the bride indicate that they will participate in the wedding day of the Lamb as the New Jerusalem in its initial consummation during the millennial kingdom. Therefore, the timing of the Lord's second coming is not arbitrary or dictated by merely fulfilling a quota of saved souls; His coming depends altogether on the preparedness of His bride.

The fascination with and looking for the fulfillment of "climactic" prophetic signs by many Christians today are a continuation of the same traits that were exhibited by the disciples during the earthly ministry of Christ in Matthew 24. The disciples wanted to know the timing and signs of the age-consummating events. However, the Lord instead focused on events related to the preaching of a building gospel (v. 14).

The disciples asked a similar question in Acts 1:6: "Lord, are You at this time restoring the kingdom to Israel?" Knowing that the restoration of the kingdom would be coincident with His coming, He instead explicitly focused the disciples on being His witnesses: the fact that only the Father knows the time of the Lord's coming means that expending much energy on pursuits related to searching for fulfillment of prophetic signs, even of ones mentioned in the Bible, is entirely futile.

An obsessive focus on the unfolding of material signs and not on the attainment of the one preeminent sign—the manifestation of the Body of Christ—actually delays the Lord's coming, because the Lord will not come for a Body that has not been built up or a bride who has not been adorned. Spiritual building and adornment precede coming.

First Corinthians 3:10-15 is one of the most disconcerting passages related to a believer's salvation, which many see as suggesting that believers can lose their salvation. However, this portion actually focuses on the building work of a believer prior to the coming of the Lord. Furthermore, it especially emphasizes the quality of the materials used—the Triune God as gold, silver, and precious stones—versus the elements of the natural man—wood, grass, and stubble. This building takes place in the present church age prior to the Lord's coming at the end of the church age. The present church age is devoted to building a spiritual manifestation of the Body.

The work of the ministry in the church age builds up the Body of Christ through its ability to engender an arrival at the oneness of the faith and of the full knowledge of the Son of God, at a full-grown man who manifests the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ at least in miniature. This building is based and dependent upon love, a love that flows from the love of God and from God, whose divine nature is love itself. An application of a building love must be demonstrated in the present age in order for the Father to happily and definitively set a time for the coming of the Lord.

In the divine economy as revealed in the Bible, the bride, the wife, of Christ is built with the resurrection life of Christ. This life-adorned bride then becomes the holy city, New Jerusalem. Both the preparation and adornment of the bride involve a building work. We need to pay attention to four important biblical indicators of building: loving one another, receiving one another, shepherding one another, and dispensing grace to one another.

by the Editors