

A Christ-Centered WEDDING

REJOICING IN THE GOSPEL ON YOUR BIG DAY



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NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

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To Erik and Tom,
our beloved husbands who, in Christ, bear all things, believe all
things, hope all things, and endure all things

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Introduction



Planning a wedding is a lot of work. For some couples it's the best job they've ever had and the work is a joy. For others it's exhausting and can lead to lots of tears and frustration.

It's so easy to lose sight of the point of it all—marriage.

Marriage is one of God's good gifts. It is a blessing to all of creation, and it's a beautiful picture of Christ's relationship with the church. Before you can experience the joy of this gift, though, you need to get through the wedding, and the wedding planning. This can be either an uplifting, encouraging experience or a frustrating exercise in trying to please everyone and failing. Many times it's a combination of the two.

Now maybe that's not the message you'll hear from wedding magazines and websites. It all looks so perfect in photographs. Everyone has a permanent smile, or tears of joy, in every photo. There are lists and spreadsheets and DIY ideas

at every turn. A quick glance at the comments of brides-to-be on Pinterest shows what is “swoon-worthy” or a “must-have.” And then there are posts like “150 Wedding Ideas You Haven’t Thought of Yet” and “60 Must-Have Wedding Photos.” It’s overwhelming.

Don’t get us wrong—we aren’t saying these things are bad or that you shouldn’t ever look at Pinterest or magazines. We have just seen so many couples suffer through planning their weddings, weighed down by all the pressure to make them unique and perfect.

So we wrote a book. We had never dreamed of writing a book, but it just happened. We had a conversation in 2011 about weddings and things we didn’t really understand when we planned Catherine’s wedding. The next thing we knew we were writing a book about this topic and someone actually wanted to publish it. So here we are.

We want you to know a few things about us, and about this book, before we get started:

1. We are not wedding experts, so this is not a “Complete Wedding Planning Guidebook.” There are so many resources like that already, including websites where you can (for free!) print spreadsheets and worksheets and lists to your heart’s content.
2. We are not rule-givers, so this is not a “12 Simple Rules for Planning a Gospel-Centered Wedding” book. The idea of following 12 rules in order to achieve a

gospel-centered wedding is actually antithetical to the idea of gospel freedom. So you won't find that here either.

3. We are not saying, "Do as we did, and you'll have the perfect wedding." When Catherine got married in 2005, we never thought about how we could present the gospel at the wedding. We wanted to bring glory to God, but we really lacked the big picture. So most of the examples and wisdom in this book come from others, not from our own experience. It's more of a "This is what we would do if we could do it over again" kind of thing.

We wrote this book because, yes, we love weddings and we love brides. But mostly we wrote it because we love the beauty of the gospel message—a holy God loved us sinners so much that He sent His Son, who lived a perfect life and became the sacrifice we needed on the cross to bring us into a loving relationship with the Father. Jesus brought us into the kingdom, and now we wait and work as His beloved—His bride—for Him to bring us home. We need to be reminded of this message daily. It gives life and so much joy!

We also recognize that there are two occasions in our lives that give us an incredible opportunity to publicly reflect the gospel to our family, friends, and coworkers—weddings and funerals. Both can be celebrations of the grace of God in the life of His children, but only in our weddings are we present to share in this joy.

Remember at the beginning when we said you have to “get through the wedding” in order to experience the gift of marriage? Well, we wrote this book with the goal of helping couples actually enjoy the gift of planning a wedding.

So as you begin planning, our prayer is that God would draw you and others closer to Himself during this time.

May He drive the beauty of gospel truth deeper into your heart.

May you reflect His grace and love to others.

May you, by His grace, better understand your identity in Christ.

And may your marriage begin at the foot of the cross, where you experience the freedom only found through Christ’s sacrificial love on your behalf.

Thank you for allowing us to be part of your wedding. Christ is all! May He be glorified!

This book is a collaboration between Catherine and Linda. The actual writing was done by Catherine, however, unless otherwise noted. So any first-person references are from Catherine’s point of view. Hope that’s not confusing!

Some names in the book have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

Chapter 1

The Best Wedding Ever



I have a close friend who lives on this crazy spectrum of extremes. She is frequently teased because nearly every story she tells includes either the words “best ever” or “worst ever.”

You probably know what I’m talking about. Each day is most likely going to be “the best day ever” or “the worst day ever.” Every date in college was either “the most amazing date ever” or “the worst night of my life.” It’s usually something along those lines. Far from annoying, it is actually really fun to be friends with her. She tells amazing stories and lives this passionate life in which she fully invests in each moment, and being around her encourages me to do the same. But even within this passion she is aware that not every moment or experience can be the best ever. Life is a series of degrees of “bestness” and “worstness,” and the true best is yet to come.

There is a sense in which a bride can easily feel this pressure to make her wedding the “best wedding ever.” I know when I was approaching my wedding I would make mental notes on weddings I had seen, taking note of aspects I wanted to replicate or some I wanted to avoid. I felt this need to make my wedding somehow classic, yet unique—traditional, yet different and better than all others. Looking back on it now, I’m saddened by how much of my wedding planning was motivated by pride. It just seemed like if it was not the best, what was the point?

What I wish someone would have said is this: Your wedding will not be the best ever. It just can’t be. So to those reading this book, we want to tell you that you can free yourself from that expectation and pressure right now. Our prayer is this book will help you think and pray through how to make your wedding a reflection and foretaste of what truly *will* be the best wedding ever—the wedding depicted in the marriage supper of the Lamb in Revelation 19.

A Beautiful Metaphor

A newly engaged woman is identifiable by the ring on her finger. When you see the ring, you can safely assume a few things about the person wearing it: she will soon be married; she is planning a wedding; she is in love; she is waiting for the day when she will be united to her fiancé. In essence, you might say she is between two realities—the life she once lived and the life to come. She once was unattached, but she will soon be someone’s wife. In a way, the engagement period can

feel very strange, as if your identity is changing and you are working through who you once were and learning to identify with who you are now, and who you soon will be.

The Bible is filled with wedding and marriage metaphors in both the Old and New Testaments. For example, Israel is repeatedly called God's bride and His betrothed. Jesus also uses this idea of betrothal throughout His ministry. In this time period, a betrothal was not as loose as our modern engagements. To be betrothed to someone meant you were legally bound but had not yet consummated the marriage. Only death or a decision made by the groom's father could break the betrothal.

In order to enter into a betrothal agreement, the bride and groom would participate in a ceremony in which they would sign a "ketubah," or marriage contract, having agreed on the responsibilities of each person. At this point the groom would go back to his father's house and work for a year or longer to build a home, or an attachment to the father's house, in which his wife and he would live. The groom would work until the day when his father gave him approval to go and get his bride and bring her home to be married.

Meanwhile, the bride was responsible to purify and prepare herself for her groom. Her job as she waited was to keep herself pure and to make her wedding clothes. She did not know when he would come for her, but she busied herself doing the simple things required of her and anticipating his return—preparing her garments, going through a cleansing bath, and wearing a veil to signify she was set apart for her husband. A bride was

required to complete these tasks because the marriage had been arranged through a “bride price”—a payment made by the father of the groom to the father of the bride. In essence, she had been bought.¹

Now you have probably picked up on where I’m going with this. Until I began to study the cultural marriage traditions of biblical times, many of these connections were lost on me. But even a small understanding of Jewish wedding culture opens our eyes to the beauty of God’s view of us. His people, whom He has redeemed, are His Son’s bride (2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 19:7–9). The Father paid the bride price to buy us for His Son, and we are now betrothed—waiting and preparing ourselves for the day when the Father tells His Son to come for us and bring us to the place He has prepared for us (1 Cor. 6:20; John 14:1–3; Mark 13:32).

Just as the bride in biblical times was called to purity and to prepare herself and her garments, the church—the bride of Christ—is called to do the same. In Ephesians 5:25–27, Paul writes, “Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her to make her holy, cleansing her with the washing of water by the word. He did this to present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and blameless.” And Revelation 7:14 says the church has “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” Our wedding garments and our purification have been provided by the Son, our Bridegroom.

Whether or not a Christian ever marries or becomes engaged, he or she is betrothed. We are in this in-between

period—no longer of the world, but also not yet present with Christ. And yet we are His bride, and nothing can separate us from Him. Just as a bride, who is in love with her fiancé, does not look around for someone else, we are to be focused on our Groom, undistracted by the allure of the world. When asked why we are so joyful, we have the answer—we have been bought with a price and we are joyfully awaiting the blessed union with our Savior!

The Best Fiancé Ever

Have you ever known that one engaged girl who loves to tell everyone how amazing her fiancé is? She's the one you avoid at all costs, who talks of nothing but wedding plans and what it will be like to be married and how lucky she is. It's kind of annoying. But part of the reason for that is you know she is talking about another human being. He might be amazing, but he's still human. He's a sinner; no wedding is perfect; and marriage is hard work. So a certain level of extreme exuberance is maybe a bit over-the-top. We have this desire to bring that friend back to reality.

But what if her fiancé *is* perfect? What if he has made the ultimate sacrifice for her? What if her wedding really *is* going to be the greatest wedding ever? What if their marriage *will* be the epitome of perfection? And what if she knows it has absolutely nothing to do with her but is all because of *him*? At that point, all the praise in the world for this fiancé would never be enough. And yet she would try, because she is loved,

and she is his bride, and she is eagerly yearning for the time when she can be with him forever.

Amazingly, God not only paid the bride price to redeem you for His Son, but the bride price *was* His Son: Christ, the Lamb of God who lived a sinless life, died, was raised from the dead and then ascended to heaven, where He now awaits the word from God the Father that He might come back for His bride to take us home. And what does the bride have to do to earn this? Not one thing (Eph. 2:8–9).

So before you read on, ask yourself if you are part of the church—the bride of Christ. Maybe you are not sure what that means, and maybe you are. Regardless, it is always good to be reminded of the truth of the gospel—the Good News. I teach elementary students in my church using LifeWay’s *The Gospel Project* curriculum. It states:

God Rules: Revelation 4:11 says, “Our Lord and God, You are worthy to receive glory and honor and power, because You have created all things, and because of Your will they exist and were created.” God is the Creator (Gen. 1:1) and Ruler of all things, and all things are held together by Him (Col. 1:17).

We Sinned: Ever since Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the garden (Gen. 3), all of humanity has followed suit. Romans 3:23 says, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” This sin separates us from the Holy God who cannot be around sin, and the just punishment for our sin is death (Rom. 6:23).

God Provided: God sent His Son Jesus, the perfect solution to our sin problem, to rescue us from the punishment we deserve (John 3:16). It's something we, as sinners, could never earn on our own. Jesus alone saves us (Eph. 2:8–9).

Jesus Gives: Jesus lived a perfect life, died on the cross for our sins, and rose again. Because Jesus gave up His life for us, we can be welcomed into God's family for eternity. He took our sin upon Himself, and in exchange gave us His perfect record and righteous standing before God. First Peter 3:18 says, "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring you to God, after being put to death in the fleshly realm but made alive in the spiritual realm."

We Respond: In response to what God has done for us in Christ, we are called only to believe this Truth and call upon Him for our salvation. Because Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6), He is our only hope. Our response: "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. One believes with the heart, resulting in righteousness, and one confesses with the mouth, resulting in salvation . . . For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom. 10:9–10, 13).²

Note that it is God who provides, Jesus who gives, and our only job is to respond with belief—faith that His Word is true and His sacrifice is finished. The result of this faith is turning from the life we once lived—and the future of eternal punishment in hell—and living with a new identity, that of a redeemed, beloved bride awaiting eternal joy and fellowship with her Groom.

If you have trusted in God’s gracious work through His Son’s perfect life, death, and resurrection; if you know you are a sinner and can do nothing to save yourself; and if you have thrown yourself upon God’s mercy, asked for His forgiveness, and turned from your former life; then you are His bride. You are betrothed to Christ; you are awaiting His return; and you have simple tasks to complete. These tasks do not make you His bride—that’s already been done and cannot be undone. Rather, you have been lovingly entrusted with the simple task of preparing yourself as you wait for your Groom.

The Best Wedding Dress Ever

In Revelation 19, John describes the future glory of the marriage supper of the Lamb in this way:

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory,

for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure”—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are the true words of God.” (Rev. 19:6–9 ESV)

We see the “Bride has made herself ready” and is now wearing bright, pure linen, which is the “righteous deeds of the saints.” But she did not make this linen herself, nor did she clean her own, formerly “filthy,” rags. In Isaiah 61:10 we see how the bride comes to wear this fine linen:

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. (ESV)

We have been clothed with His salvation and His righteousness. And this happened because “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21 ESV). This is a beautiful, amazing truth!

Revelation 19 pictures the great culmination of God’s rescue plan—His work of redeeming for Himself a people, a

bride for His Son. So today we anticipate this future reality as we work and wait, rejoicing in every opportunity to look on the beauty of our Bridegroom and meditate on God's love for us in Christ.

We Just Want to Be Married

At the same time, the more we grow in grace and love, the more we want to be with Him. At some point I think every engaged couple says, "We just want to be married." Similarly, that is the ache in the heart of the Christian who is growing in love for the Savior—we just want to be with Him at last! In a way, planning a wedding is this unique opportunity to do practically what we are all doing figuratively as we await Christ's return. You will look forward with eagerness to the wedding day, but in the meantime there are tasks you must complete and mundane decisions that must be made.

In light of eternity you might think, *What does it matter which chairs we choose?* Or, *Who cares what the centerpieces look like?* These are mundane decisions—the banal details that can send an otherwise sane bride over the edge. But while planning a wedding is an unusual experience, having to carry out seemingly pointless tasks is not.

I have two small children, and at this stage in my life many days are a series of seemingly pointless tasks. I change diapers. I wipe noses. I do laundry. I build block towers just to have them knocked down. There are many moments when these things seem insignificant. And yet I know they are not, and here are

just two of many reasons why: First, they are the tasks given to me for this season of life by a sovereign God who loves me dearly. Second, these little moments are the means by which God uses me to accomplish a bigger task—loving my children and teaching them the truth of the gospel.

In your wedding planning, you will most likely not care about every decision you must make. And this is not a call to place more importance on things than necessary. I don't make a huge deal out of making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. It's a sandwich. But I must do it so that my children's tummies will be full and they will know they are loved. And if I get to teach them about Jesus while they are eating, that's great! But have you ever tried to teach a toddler something when he is hungry? It's not happening.

Similarly, the chairs, the dishes, the food, the centerpieces—in the light of eternity these little decisions just do not matter. What does matter is having seats for your guests and feeding them as you celebrate together. The decisions are not the end in and of themselves. Rather, they are the means to an end. And even accomplishing the means can be an act of worship as you faithfully complete the tasks God has given you to do.

Who Am I and What Am I Doing Here?

The act of making a PB&J or handcrafting a centerpiece will not earn God's favor, any more than missions work or teaching will. These actions do not save us, and they do not even sanctify us. All of that is the work of God through His

Son and the Holy Spirit. I frequently must remind myself of the truth of Ephesians 2:8–10: “For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is God’s gift—not from works, so that no one can boast. For we are His creation, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time so that we should walk in them.”

We were created, in Christ, for good works. But the joy comes in knowing God prepared these works ahead of time and all we must do is walk in them in the faith He has given us. We have all we need to do this, or He would not give us these works. Second Peter 1:3 says God’s power has “given us everything required for life and godliness” through knowing Him.

There will be times when you will have the urge to give up or might wonder if it’s really worth all this work. The good news is this: as you plan your wedding and live out this great metaphor for the Christian walk, know that you have *all* you need in Christ. And truly, all you need *is* Christ. When we find our identity in Him—in being His beloved bride—we can face any task knowing we are equipped.

This is because, as Elyse Fitzpatrick writes:

God has graciously chosen, adopted, and sealed us for his own glory. He is giving himself to us, and if we’re not distracted by our self-efforts and self-trust, we will respond by defining ourselves by that love. Who are you? You’re his, he is yours, and you’ve been cleansed from sin. And that’s all the identity any of us need.³

Sinful and Flawed; Loved and Accepted

Throughout this book we will refer to “the gospel,” which is described in detail earlier in this chapter. Not only is the gospel the power of salvation, but it is also what fuels our sanctification (growth as a believer) and promises our future glorification, when we will be made like Christ (1 John 3:2). As Tim Keller has so beautifully stated, “The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.”²⁴ This truth is what fuels us, and this is what we will come back to over and over in this book. You are loved; you are accepted; and your identity is now wrapped up in Christ.

Remember that annoying bride who brags about her fiancé? You don’t have to be her, because your Bridegroom is also your Savior and Lord. You have been bought for His glory. And one day you, with the rest of His bride, the church, will be joined with Him in the ultimate wedding celebration. This is who you are—you are His. Our earthly marriages are not permanent. They are a gift to us now, and a means by which we can glorify God. What *is* permanent is your union with Christ and your identity in Him.

As you plan your wedding, we pray you would see the bigger picture represented by our “momentary” marriages. May you rejoice in your secure position as Christ’s bride, and may you thank Him for the gift of earthly love, so that as two become one you have a partner with whom you can walk through life as you prepare together for your ultimate wedding—the greatest wedding *ever*.