

Plans for the Future

What is going to happen in the world this year? In the next few years? In the next 20 years? The next 100?

What is going to happen in your life this year? What are your plans? How far ahead into the future do you have plans? Or are they simply hopes, ambitions and aspirations? Even a 'bucket list', perhaps? How about priorities?

If you have children, have you ever had plans for them? Perhaps you have some ideas right now? Success with exams? Meaningful careers? Relationships? Good marriages? Happy families? Priorities again?

What about God's plans? What is top of his priority list? That sounds like a difficult question. After all, he is rather busy! World peace, perhaps, or the end of poverty and disease?

Maybe surprisingly, the answer seems to shine out clearly from the Bible, especially in the New Testament. **He is preparing for 'the marriage supper of the Lamb'.**

You may think I am exaggerating. After all, this phrase only turns up in one passage in the Bible, **Revelation 19:7-9**. Let's look at it . . .

In **v.7**, it says "Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready." In **v.9**, it speaks about the wedding supper of the Lamb.

If this was only found in the book of Revelation, part of the visions which John saw when he was imprisoned on the island of Patmos, we might have no great interest in following it up, but there is a continuing theme here.

In **2 Corinthians 11:2**, Paul writes "I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him." Who is he writing to? Not to one individual but to the whole church in Corinth, and he is writing in the context of his fears that they are in danger of going off on a wrong path, away from the Lord. He sees that what he has done in bringing the Corinthian believers to Christ is to set up their relationship with the Lord Jesus to be like the relationship of a bride-to-be with her husband-to-be. Corporately, not individually.

In ***Ephesians 5:22-32*** (the well-known passage about husbands and wives!), Paul writes about how the Lord is the head of the church (**v.23**) and how he has loved it and given himself up for it, so that he might “make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” (**v.25-27**) - again the picture of the church as the bride, and again he is speaking of the ‘body’ of the church, as he goes on to say “In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church - for we are members of his body. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery - but I am talking about Christ and the church.” (**v.28-32**)

So, the present situation is that the Lord Jesus feeds and cares for the church because it is his body and will become his bride, and he longs to be able to present it radiant, holy and blameless, without any failing or disfigurement - wow! Little wonder that he and the Father are looking forward to the day when the process will be completed and the marriage can proceed!

Let’s pause for a moment and ask ourselves: ‘**Who is included in these plans?**’ It is clear that the church is not a man-made organisation - however good or scriptural that organisation may be - nor is it made by joining several different man-made organisations together. The Greek word ‘ekklesia’ (translated ‘church’) means ‘the called out’ - those who have responded to the call, who have ‘believed into’ the Lord Jesus. The sense of having been transferred from one place to another, from one sphere of authority to another, is repeated often. See ***Ephesians 2:13-22*** and ***Colossians 1:13-14***, for example. This is an individual matter. The church is a corporate body which is made up of individual members, each called upon to fulfil their proper role. See ***Romans 12*** (especially **v.5**), ***1 Corinthians 12*** (especially **v.27**) and ***Ephesians 4*** (especially **v.7**).

This sharing together, this fellowship, is central to the process of ‘the bride making herself ready’. In that same passage in ***Ephesians 4***, Paul writes that “From him (Christ) the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” (**V.16**) Another translation says “from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, **according to the proper working of each individual part**, causes the growth of

the body for the building up of itself in love.” The body (i.e. the church) causes its own growth when it is fitted together and every part is joined in and working.

This is amazing - and exciting! It means that, when we are functioning properly in the fellowship of believers, we are contributing to the growth of the church, playing our part in ‘the Bride making herself ready.’

Let’s just look at that a little. How do we grow? I am not talking about increased numbers, but spiritual growth. The development of the church depends completely on the spiritual life of the individual members.

And how do we grow individually? In my own experience, growth usually seems to follow on from **seeing something**. That might be some great truth that we have somehow missed and then ‘see’, or a simple insight from someone else’s experience. It might be from the loving honesty of a brother or sister who has the courage to challenge us about something which may not be quite right in our lives, or getting a fresh glimpse of the glory of God in the midst of a time of worship. In some way or other, our eyes are opened and we come to know the Lord a little bit better. **2 Corinthians 3:18** describes the process beautifully.

Yes, after seeing, the next bit is working it out in practice - but the seeing needs to come first!

You don’t really need me to explain the next step, do you? How we can contribute to each other’s growth? Simply by sharing what we have ‘seen’. Perhaps one to one, chatting over a coffee, maybe in the informality of a home group or in a larger gathering. Caring enough to share what is becoming real in our own lives, to learn to be real with each other. (**Ephesians 4:15**)

This is a sobering thought. God’s plan of the ages, to sum up everything in his Son (see **Colossians 1:15-20**), moves forwards by the ‘building up’ of the church, each part learning to function properly. That’s us - our relationships with Father, with each other in church fellowship and with everyone else in our lives.

Another exciting bit: **Our Father is committed to work it all out in us, if we will let him.** “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed - not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence - continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for **it is God who works in you to will and to act** in order to fulfil his good purpose.” (**Philippians 2:12-13**)

Paul knew the same reality in his own service. We might look at him and admire the strength of purpose and tenacity of this ground-breaking apostle, but he knew where it all came from:

“Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness - the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is **Christ in you, the hope of glory**. He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. To this end **I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.**” (*Colossians 1:24-29*).

He knew that the Lord had given him a vital task - to make known the glorious riches of Christ. In his case, that meant travelling and going to fresh places with the good news but it was really just an extension of what every member of the church learns to do - growing and sharing - and the Holy Spirit works in us and with us to build up the church, getting us all ready for that great marriage feast!

Paul could see this happening in churches he knew. In *Philippians 1:4-6* he writes “In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

What about us? Perhaps we can begin to get a clearer perspective on how vital our own growth is, both individually and together. They are interdependent: As we benefit from each other's sharing, we grow and then **we** have more to give - and the process continues . . .

“. . . let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” *Hebrews 10:24-25*.

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