

# CHAPTER TWO

# THE TRUE BRIDEGROOM

*“...my soul is stormy, and my heart blows wild.  
Where might my lonesome lover be?”*

*-Woodie Guthrie, “Birds and Ships”*

They say you never forget your first love; its memory clings to you like a disease. A friend of mine once commented on how strange he found the whole dating process. What doesn't lead to marriage leaves you with a headful of wasted trivia. Birthdays. Favorite songs. The names of the streets you used to drive down. These become the memories that mean everything and nothing at the same time. Even when your heart is broken, you can never scrape the pieces completely clean. You're left with things you can't get rid of or explain — not to family, not to friends — like how you can never listen to the Rolling Stones the same way, or the way the smell of perfume makes you sad.

The Bible is essentially a love story. It opens with the marriage of Adam and Eve; it culminates in the marriage of heaven and earth. But between its pages we find a story of betrothal and betrayal that would rival any soap opera. Prior to the birth of Jesus, Israel understood her relationship to God as that of a bride and a Bridegroom. “[I] covered your nakedness,” God tells his people through the prophet Ezekiel. “I swore a solemn oath to you and entered into a marriage covenant with you...and you became mine” (Ezekiel 16:8). For Israel, the defining moment was the story of the Exodus, when God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt and brought them through the desert to the Promised Land. Years later, we find God reflecting on the past like a wounded lover thumbing through a tear-stained wedding album. “I have fond memories of you,” he says through Jeremiah. “I remember how you loved me like a new bride...What fault could your ancestors have possibly found in me that they strayed so far from me?” (Jeremiah 2:2-5). Israel would once again be sentenced to exile through the nations of Babylon and Assyria.

All this forms the backdrop of the deeply-storied world that Jesus narrates himself into. Israel had her land back, but her state of exile had not fully ended — not psychologically, at any rate, and certainly not spiritually. In years past the nation had languished under the rule of oppressors like Egypt and Babylon. Now, it was Rome, a nation whose rulers had the audacity to claim to be the “king of the Jews” and the true “Son of God.” Where did that leave Israel? With the hope-laden stories of exodus and exile, and a lover's fading promise:

*“...in the future I will allure her; I will lead her back into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. From there I will give back her vineyards to her, and turn the ‘Valley of Trouble’ into an ‘Opportunity for Hope.’” (Hosea 2:14-16)*

The people of Israel were waiting on a new exodus, and end to their current exile. But while the stories and songs of the past were fresh on her mind they remained far from her grasp. After years of failed uprisings and would-be saviors, a growing sense of despondency crept across the land like kudzu vine. When would God's people finally be free from exile? When would the true Bridegroom make good on his promise?

## EXILE ON MAIN STREET

What songs or stories describe the modern experience? In his book *The American Dream*, Andrew Delbanco begins by noting that “human beings need to organize the [incomplete] sensations amid which we pass our days...into a story.”<sup>1</sup> He explains: “When that story leads somewhere and thereby helps us navigate through life...it gives us hope. And if such a sustaining narrative establishes itself over time in the minds of a substantial number of people, we call it culture.”<sup>2</sup> But while the ancient Jews had a shared hope in a new exodus, modern western culture has no such shared cultural hope. He cites Alexis de Tocqueville, whose nineteenth century writings cautioned that American democracy would “make every man forget his ancestors...it throws him back forever upon himself alone, and threatens to confine him entirely within the confines of his own heart.” Elsewhere, de Tocqueville says that the cost of individualism would be the loss of the nation itself:

“Each [person], living apart, is a stranger to the fate of the rest...he is close to them, but does not see them; he touches them, but he does not feel them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone; and if his kindred still remain to him, he may be said at any rate to have lost his country.”<sup>3</sup>

In short, we've lost a common story, and lost a sense of place. If there's a song that describes our postmodern exile, it's the 90s anthem “Name” by The Goo Goo Dolls:

“And even though the moment passed me by  
I still can't turn away  
'Cause all the dreams you never thought you'd lose  
Get tossed along the way...

And now we're grown-up orphans  
That never knew their names  
We don't belong to no one  
That's a shame

[...]

We grew up way too fast

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, quoted by Delbanco, 108-109.

And now there's nothing to believe  
And reruns all become our history

A tired song keeps playing on a tired radio  
And I won't tell no one your name  
I won't tell 'em your name."<sup>4</sup>

We're the nameless orphans of the American Dream, a generation whose love stories left us alone and abandoned on the shores of uncertainty. But the story of Jesus is the story of how the hopelessness of exile might be reversed — the story of how true Love has pursued us, set us free from the prison of self, and set our gaze toward home.

## THE NEW EXODUS

Jesus' earthly ministry begins during a season of revival. Throngs have gathered around a wide-eyed street preacher named John the Baptist. Most of what we know about this curious character comes from Jesus' other biographers: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John was a pastor's kid, born to one of the temple priests, and the cousin to Jesus himself. Some speculate that after his parents' death, John fell in with a group of desert hippies known as the Essenes. But John doesn't seem to have adopted their practices as much as reinvented them. With a wardrobe of camel hair and a diet of locusts and honey, John was somewhere between evangelist and Grizzly Adams. His ministry is relatively short, yet it sets off a chain reaction. Notice that when John tells the story of how Jesus' ministry began, he does so over a series of successive days, starting with the day that the Jewish leaders first approached John the Baptist.

### *Day One: The Voice in the Wilderness*

Keep in mind that by the first century, Israel had already experienced the pain of a series of would-be Messiahs. The most obvious was Judas Maccabeus, who had led a revolt against Syria in roughly 160 BC. But while the nation longed for the day of liberation, there was little widespread agreement on just what exactly the Messiah must be like. This seems to be the reason why the Jewish leadership is sending representatives out for an interview:

“Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?...Are you Elijah?...Are you the Prophet?’ He answered....‘I am the voice of one shouting in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord,’ as Isaiah the prophet said... (John 1:19-23)

The leaders run through a list of possible candidates. John denies them all. John is less interested in who he *is* than in what role he performs: the “voice in the wilderness,” preparing the way for the Lord. Through Isaiah's text, John sees himself as paving the way for the Messiah's arrival.

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<sup>4</sup> Goo Goo Dolls, “Name,” from the 1995 album *A Boy Named Goo*.

## Day Two: The Lamb of God

It's not until "the next day" that we're finally introduced to Jesus through the testimony of John the Baptist:

On the next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!...I saw the Spirit descending like a dove from heaven, and it remained on him. And I did not recognize him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'The one on whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining—this is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' I have both seen and testified that this man is the Chosen One of God." (John 1:29-34)

At some point in the recent past, John had baptized Jesus. When he did, he instantly recognized the Spirit's descent as indicating that Jesus was, indeed, the "Chosen One of God." John also makes an important distinction: he baptizes with water, but Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit — bringing life and purity to all who believe. Jesus' baptism "was simultaneously an attestation of who Jesus is and an announcement that the promised age of the Spirit had dawned."

But hearers would have heard something altogether strange about John's presentation. He first declares that Jesus is the "lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." In the Jewish faith, the image of a lamb would have complex, layered meaning, ranging from the lamb of Passover to the daily temple sacrifices. One thing would be certain: that Jesus is the sacrificial Lamb who would rid the world of sin. It's as if John were saying: *Yes; Jesus will bring in a new exodus — but not the way you think. Your problems run deeper than mere political exile. Your problem is older. Your problem is darker. Your problem is sin.*

Even today, what you think of Jesus depends largely on what you think your problem truly is. If you think our problems are primarily political, then you will see Jesus as a social revolutionary — another Ghandi. If you think our greatest problems are psychological, then you'll look to Jesus for comforting advice. And if you think our greatest problems are moral, then you'll see Jesus as a good moral teacher or spiritual guide. Now, it's true that our world is suffering politically, morally, and psychologically. But beneath all of these external causes runs a river of guilt as old as time itself. In the 1960s, Barry Goldwater described the human condition while running for President.

"We have conjured up all manner of devils responsible for our present discontent. It is the unchecked bureaucracy in government, it is the selfishness of multinational corporate giants, it is the failure of the schools to teach and the students to learn, it is overpopulation, it is wasteful extravagance, it is squandering our national resources, it is racism, it is capitalism, it is our material affluence, or if we want a convenient foreign devil, we can say it is communism. But when we scrape away the varnish of wealth, education, class, ethnic origin, parochial loyalties, we discover that however much we've changed the shape of man's physical environment, man himself is still sinful, vain, greedy, ambitious, lustful, self-centered, unrepentant, and requiring of restraint."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Barry M. Goldwater, *With No Apologies*. (New York: Morrow, 1979), 4-5.

Once we understand that our greatest need is sin, then we will long for Jesus to be our atoning sacrifice, the One who wipes clean our guilt and leads us to freedom from sin and self-absorption.

### *Day Three: Chain Reaction*

By the next day, Jesus has begun to gain followers of his own:

Again the next day John was standing there with two of his disciples. Gazing at Jesus as he walked by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!" When John's two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. Jesus turned around and saw them following and said to them, "What do you want?" So they said to him, "Rabbi" (which is translated Teacher), "where are you staying?" Jesus answered, "Come and you will see." So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day. Now it was about four o'clock in the afternoon. Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, was one of the two disciples who heard what John said and followed Jesus. He first found his own brother Simon and told him, "We have found the Messiah!" (which is translated Christ). Andrew brought Simon to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon, the son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter). (John 1:35-37)

The first words that Jesus speaks in John's gospel come as a probing question: "What do you want?" It wouldn't have been unusual for followers to spontaneously choose their teachers. By their response, they seem to be looking for someone to follow. And what's interesting is that Jesus' early movement doesn't grow through a press release or a church growth seminar. It grows by friends and family tapping each other on the shoulder and saying: "come and see."

### *Day Four: Jacob's Ladder*

Jesus' earliest followers instantly recognized that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Others, like Nathaniel, remained skeptical:

On the next day Jesus wanted to set out for Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me."...Philip found Nathaniel and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the law, and the prophets also wrote about—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." Nathaniel replied, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip replied, "Come and see." Jesus saw Nathaniel coming toward him and exclaimed, "Look, a true Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathaniel asked him, "How do you know me?" Jesus replied, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Nathaniel answered him. "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel!" Jesus said to him, "Because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You will see greater things than these...I tell you all the solemn truth—you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." (John 1:43-51)

To be fair, it's hard to blame Nathaniel. Nazareth was the sort of place more likely to produce the next NASCAR champion than the Savior of mankind. But Jesus shatters Nathaniel's incredulity. He

knows him by name; he saw Nathaniel “under the fig tree,” two revelations that leave Nathaniel awestruck. And, according to Jesus, he ain’t seen nothin’ yet. Nathaniel would “see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” God had revealed himself, previously, in a vision (Genesis 28:10-22). Now, God is revealing himself through Jesus Christ. Nathaniel, like the rest, will see God’s glory revealed through Jesus’ miraculous signs.

## THE TRUE BRIDEGROOM

The first of Jesus’ signs occurs at a wedding in Cana. Believe it or not, but ancient weddings were an even bigger deal than those of today. After the official “ceremony,” the wedding celebration could last as long as a week. So it’s at one such celebration that we find Jesus sitting with his disciples and his mother:

Now on the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee. Jesus’ mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the wedding. When the wine ran out, Jesus’ mother said to him, “They have no wine left.” Jesus replied, “Woman, why are you saying this to me? My time has not yet come.” His mother told the servants, “Whatever he tells you, do it.” (John 2:1-5)

In a culture that valued hospitality, running out of wine was more than a social *faux pas*. It could have devastating consequences for the couple’s future. When Jesus’ mother first brings this to Jesus’ attention, his response is polite, though noncommittal. Still, like any mother, she persists, telling the catering staff to follow her son’s instructions.

Now there were six stone jars there for Jewish ceremonial washing, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus told the servants, “Fill the water jars with water.” So they filled them up to the very top. Then he told them, “Now draw some out and take it to the head steward,” and they did. When the head steward tasted the water that had been turned to wine, not knowing where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), he called the bridegroom and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the cheaper wine when the guests are drunk. You have kept the good wine until now!” Jesus did this as the first of his miraculous signs, in Cana of Galilee. In this way he revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him. (John 2:6-11)

Ordinarily, drinking from these purification jars would have been unthinkable; they were used only for washing prior to meals. But the head caterer seemed not to notice. Instead, he was floored by the sheer quality of the wine — not to mention its timing. Not knowing of Jesus’ involvement, he pays a compliment to the bridegroom of the party, marveling that he saved the “good wine until now.” Mind you, public drunkenness would have been frowned upon among conservative Jews. But apparently party guests were known to drink until they couldn’t distinguish between the chardonnay and the stuff that came out of a box. Jesus hadn’t merely turned water into wine. This was *good* wine, and Jesus had transformed symbols of purification into sources of celebration.

What is the meaning of this sign? If we are to understand how this miracle fits into the story of Jesus, we must be clear about three basic elements: the feast, the “hour,” and the third day.

## *The Feast*

First, the feast itself is an integral part of Israel's story. The abundance of wine marked the end of exile and the dawn of the age of the Messiah. "I will bring back my people," God promised through Amos. "They will plant vineyards and drink the wine they produce" (Amos 9:14). And in the book of Revelation, the dawning of God's new creation would be celebrated through "the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Revelation 19:9).

Jesus is the true Bridegroom. In his first sign, he transforms the present feast into a "signpost" that points to the better feast that lies ahead. Though not here yet, God's promised future is a reality that's so real, you can taste it like fruit from the vine.

## *The Hour*

Second, we have the first of many references to "the hour." When Jesus' mother tries to enlist Jesus to help, he tells her that "my time [hour] has not come." In John's gospel, the "hour" refers to the fateful time when Jesus will lay down his life on the cross.

Can we talk about how unabashedly weird Jesus is? His mother makes a simple statement ("they have no more wine") and Jesus responds with: "I'm not ready to die." But that's because Jesus understands the shocking cost of the greater feast to come. If God is going to renew humanity, if God is going to usher in a feast at the end of human history, then it can only come at the expense of the Son. Jesus must lay his life down as the true "lamb of God," lifting away the sin of the world and granting us entrance to God's endless celebration.

If humanity has any hope of becoming worthy to God, it won't be the result of external religious ritual like the purification jars. It will only come at the hour when the Savior of the world gives his life so that we can be made whole.

## *The Third Day*

Finally, we come to "the third day." John's phrasing could be just as easily rendered: "three days later," meaning three days after the call of Nathaniel. If you do the math, this puts us at day seven. Think about this for a moment. In the book of Genesis, what do we read? We read: "in the beginning." Then seven days go by. There is a wedding of Adam and Eve, and soon enough everything falls to ruin. But in John's gospel, we read: "in the beginning." Then seven days go by. There is a wedding — only this time, Jesus brings the promise of lasting renewal. The parallels to Genesis aren't exact, but they're hardly accidental. Do you see what Jesus is saying, here? His first sign-miracle is a promise that the world doesn't have to be as bad as all that. You never forget your first love; that may be true. But through union with Jesus our past doesn't have to be our future, as the God of the universe turns creation itself on its head.

And it's not for nothing that John uses the phrase "the third day." This would also bring up associations with the resurrection of Jesus. The first sign therefore points to the greatest sign Jesus performs, as if he's giving us the "happily ever after" in the same breath as "once upon a time." For

a people languishing in exile, hope has dawned. Our destiny is secure in the Savior who brings light from darkness, order from chaos, and even life from the grave.

## THE VOW

We come now to a fateful question: Why would anyone follow Jesus at all? If you're a traditionally religious person, the question might come down to a form of "fire insurance" — you want to avoid the flames of Hell, so you make sure you "get saved" to gain entrance to heaven when you die. Or, maybe you follow Jesus out of a desire to make the best of a particular season of life. "Jesus helped me get through law school," you might say, or "Jesus brought a lot of peace after my dad died." Basically, it's ok to follow Jesus — as long as you're not a "fanatic" about it.

But if Jesus is the true Bridegroom, then we simply don't have the option to trust Jesus with only one part of our lives. Because if the Church is the bride of Christ, it means two important things. First, it means that following Jesus takes total commitment. When you get married, you exchange a portion of your freedom for the joy of belonging. When a friend of mine was getting married, he began realizing just how much his life would change. No more late-night runs to the drive-thru. No more drinking milk straight from the carton. *He'd have to put the toilet seat down.* But he also began to understand what G.K. Chesterton was saying when he said that "there is no such thing as 'free love'...It is the nature of love to bind itself." To truly be happy, we have to surrender our freedom for love's sake. To trust Jesus with only a sliver of your life isn't really trusting him at all. It's the spiritual equivalent of an "open marriage," pledging your allegiance to Christ while looking elsewhere for comfort, security, or satisfaction. Only by following him totally will we find our hearts truly satisfied.

Second, like a marriage, following Jesus brings total transformation. Elsewhere in the New Testament, Paul describes the Church as the "bride of Christ." Jesus "loved the church and gave himself for her to sanctify her by cleansing her with the washing of the water by the word, so that he may present the church to himself as glorious— not having a stain or wrinkle, or any such blemish, but holy and blameless" (Ephesians 5:25-27). If you're a traditionally religious person, you might prefer to be "blameless" by virtue of your own moral record. But that's impossible. Christianity says that the only way to be transformed is with the purification of the Bridegroom's sacrificial love.

And in the Christian story, it is the Bridegroom himself that makes the deepest vow. "We love because he first loved us," John tells us elsewhere in one of his letters. Through Jesus, the voice that once shook the cedars now speaks tenderly to us. The God of the Universe covers us over with the mercies of Christ so that we can be brought into his tender care. And in the presence of this Bridegroom, we find that even our darkest days will one day be replaced with a "happily ever after."