

The first three psalms of Book II, Psalms 42-43, 44, challenge believers to put their hope in God even though their souls are downcast and the people of God are under attack. The Psalms prove that real worship never takes place in a vacuum free from the pressures and trials of life. We thirst for God in a dry and weary land. We suffer the reproach and disgrace of our neighbors. The world, the flesh, and the devil, confront us at every turn, and because of the Lord's unfailing love we cry out to God for help.

But as we have seen there is a rhythm to the Psalms that alternates between the dark night of the soul and Yahweh's new-every-morning-faithfulness. Psalm 45 pivots from heartache and hardship to the joyful celebration of a royal wedding. The juxtaposition of soul-churning lament and a soul-inspiring love song captures the extremes of life. The psalms move from the depths of persecution to the heights of the throne of God. True worshipers live in the reality of one and the hope and expectation of the other.

We need artists and musicians to draw out the meaning of life. Love is too important to be neglected by the poet's passion and the writer's skill. Love calls for a song. The sons of Korah were musicians who believed in the sacramental cast of life. Their aesthetic sensibilities were "stirred by a noble theme." The royal wedding described in Psalm 45 is a memorable, once-in-a-lifetime event. The psalmist seeks to capture the full sensory experience of a royal wedding, but he does so with a second meaning in mind: the marriage of God and his people.

The occasion of a royal wedding between Israel's king and his bride becomes the scene for playing out the drama of redemption on a grand scale. God's illustrations are always the best, and when describing God's love for us the Lord chooses an analogy that is bound to get our attention. Our hearts can better grasp the meaning of God's love through the power of metaphor. A picture is worth a thousand words, and one of the most effective pictures illustrating the love of God is that of love between a husband and a wife.¹

Psalm 45 celebrates two loves, marital love and divine love, romantic love and redemptive love. The lesser love, the love between a husband and wife, is meant to help us grasp more completely the personal intimacy and earnestness of God's love for us. The greater love, God's sacrificial, saving love, is meant to be the source, strength and standard for human love. The power and intensity of the oneness experienced between a man and a woman points to the greater mystery of our oneness with God in Christ.²

*My heart is stirred by a noble theme
as I recite my verses for the king;
my tongue is the pen of a skillful writer.*

Psalm 45:1

¹ Webster, Soulcraft, 85.

² Webster, Soulcraft, 88.

Your Majesty

*You are the most excellent of men
and your lips have been anointed with grace,
since God has blessed you forever.
Gird your sword on your side, you mighty one;
clothe yourself with splendor and majesty
In your majesty ride forth victoriously
in the cause of truth, humility and justice;
let your right hand achieve awesome deeds.
Let your sharp arrows pierce the hearts of the king's enemies;
Let the nations fall beneath your feet.
Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever;
a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom.
You love righteousness and hate wickedness;
therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions
by anointing you with the oil of joy.
All your robes are fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia;
from palaces adorned with ivory the music of strings makes you glad.
Daughters of kings are among your honored women;
at your right hand is the royal bride in gold of Ophir.*

Psalm 45:2-9

The psalmist's song begins as it should with the person. Anything else would be a distraction. The impressive royal surroundings pale in significance to the whole person. All eyes are on the king. Three initial attributes are identified: his appearance, his speech, and the blessing of God. His "striking appearance" sets him apart from other men.³ The poet sees his outward appearance in the light of his "personal and official significance."⁴ The reason the king is the "handsomest of men" is because character shapes perception. The second line parallels the first and refers to his lips "anointed with grace." The psalmist sees his physical appearance in the wisdom of his speech. Sight and sound converge and testify to the blessing of God. No matter how extravagant and elaborate a wedding may be, it all comes down to the bride and groom, their gifts, their character, their love for each other, and the blessing of God. Everything else is secondary.

The historical setting for Psalm 45 remains obscure. The specific king and queen who inspired the psalm are not identified. This may not be a liability but a pastoral benefit intended by the psalmist to extend the metaphor to countless brides and grooms who on their wedding day feel like kings and queens blessed by God forever. Along with this pastoral benefit, there are messianic implications. The poet uses superlative language to describe the transcendent courage and valor of the king. He is the mighty one clothed in splendor and majesty. He rides forth victoriously, taking up the cause of truth, humility and justice. His is a transcendent figure, achieving awesome deeds, conquering his enemies, and causing the nations to fall beneath his

³ Ross, Psalms, 67.

⁴ Goldingay, Psalms, 56-57.

feet. The language goes well beyond the description of a human king.⁵ Even King David in all his glory did not come anywhere close to this king. The hyperbole leaves the distinct impression that the psalmist had a redemptive trajectory in mind and intended his song to be a messianic psalm. The king's rule and reign in righteousness forever recalls the messianic promises and prophecies of 2 Samuel 7.

The climax of the description comes when the psalmist says, "Your throne, O God, will last forever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom" (Ps 45:6). The author of Hebrews quotes this verse in his chain of seven quotations to show the supremacy of Jesus Christ. He understands Psalm 45 "as a direct verbal prophecy concerning the perpetual nature of the Son's reign" and "the reference to 'God, your God' . . . reinforces the distinction. . . between the Son and the Father, thus communicating an implicit Trinitarian perspective of the Son as God but makes a distinction between him and the Father."⁶ Hebrews declares the exalted enthronement of the Son because of his eternal, holy, and unchanging nature.⁷ His just rule will make everything right. Moreover the militancy of the king is in keeping with the king's victorious pursuit of "truth, humility and justice" (Ps 45:4). Divergent lines of prophecy converge in the one who is nailed to a cross and crowned with many crowns – the Lamb upon the throne. Jesus is the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 and the exalted rider called "Faithful and True," who will rule and reign one day with an iron scepter (Rev 19:11-16).

The poet's picture of the royal wedding awakens all the senses. The king is set apart by God and anointed with the oil of joy in the majestic setting of a palace adorned with ivory. His robes carry the fragrant scent of myrrh, aloes, and cassia (cinnamon) and the sound of strings fills the air. His royal bride is by his side wearing a golden crown. The Bible's consistent use of human love as a metaphor for divine love helps to dispel the notion that they are rival loves. Far from being in competition with God's love, marital love was given as a gracious expression of God's love. These two loves enhance one another in beautiful harmony.⁸

The Royal Bride

*Listen, daughter and pay careful attention:
Forget your people and your father's house.
Let the king be enthralled by your beauty;
honor him, for he is your lord.
The city of Tyre will come with a gift,
people of wealth will seek your favor.
All glorious is the princess within her chamber;
her gown is interwoven with gold.
In embroidered garments she is led to the king;*

⁵ Ross, Psalms, 71. Ross writes, "Any application to a historical figure would be idealistic, for no king ever championed only righteousness, let alone lived up to the titles and epithets given to him, try as he might. But again, these words will find their true and literal meaning in the righteous reign of the Messiah."

⁶ George Guthrie, "Hebrews," Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, Beale and Carson, 938.

⁷ O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 65.

⁸ Webster, Soucraft, 90.

*her virgin companions follow her – those brought to be with her.
Led in with joy and gladness,
they enter the palace of the king.*

Psalm 45:10-16

The royal wedding of the king to his bride bends the arc of this metaphor to Christ and his Church. The solemn instruction given to the bride is more analogous to the Spirit's guidance to the Bride of Christ than it is to marital counsel. The biblical emphasis on mutual submission between a husband and wife in marriage is not on par with the Church's relationship to her Lord. If a husband carries a "king of the castle" mentality into marriage and acts as if his wife is his possession and that she exists to meet his needs, the marriage is bound to fail. It will fail as a loving marriage and it fail as a testimony to Christ and his Church. Marriage fulfills a need for mankind (Gen 2:18) that knows no need or want within the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The union of two image-bearers of God calls for a man to leave his father and mother and to be united to his wife in a one-flesh relationship (Gen 2:24).

Mutual submission "out of reverence for Christ" (Eph 5:21) applies the principle of the cross to the marriage relationship in countless ways. A wife's life is not subject to the whim of her husband but is defined in Christ, even as a husband's love is patterned after Christ's love for the church. "The husband is the head of the wife just in so far as he is to her what Christ is to the Church," writes C. S. Lewis. "He is to love her as Christ loved the Church—read on—'and gave his life for her.'" Lewis rightly observes that what the Bible commends is not a husband's superiority but rather his Christlike sacrifice.¹⁰

The instruction given to the royal bride is best heard today by the church, not the wife. The directive to "forget your people and your father's house" is rendered well by the counsel of the apostle, "Put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires. . .and put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph 4:22-24). The household of faith echoes the life-changing commitment made by Ruth to Naomi and Naomi's God: "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). The imperative, "Let the king be enthralled by your beauty," is a call to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness (Ps 96:9). And to honor the Lord is to know that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, that we are not our own, that we were bought with a price, and therefore we honor God with our bodies (1 Cor 6:19-20).

The psalmist captures the joy and gladness of a bridal processional graced with dignitaries and gifts. "Her wedding dress is dazzling, lined with gold by the weavers; all her dresses and robes are woven with gold. She is led to the king, followed by her virgin companions. A procession of joy and laughter! A grand entrance to the king's palace!" (Ps 45:13-15, MSG).

Did Jesus have Psalm 45 in mind when he was invited to the wedding in Cana of Galilee? Like the King of kings and Lord of lords he turned water into wine. He "revealed his glory" and "his

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1960), 105.

¹⁰ Webster, *Ephesians: The Christ Letter*, 147-150.

disciples put their faith in him” (John 2:11). The unsuspecting bride and groom never dreamed that their invitation to Jesus would change everything. Jesus delivered his Sermon on the End World from the Mount of Olives two days before his final Passover. Once again he may have had Psalm 45 in mind when he likened the coming kingdom of heaven to a wedding ceremony with ten bridesmaids. The role of these girls in the ceremony may have been to escort the bridegroom in a torchlight procession.¹¹

In Jesus’ parable, five of the bridesmaids are foolish and five are wise. The thoughtful bridesmaids are a picture of the Christian’s life-long faithfulness. They are prepared to go the distance. Their lamps remain lit, because they have the oil of disciplined, disciplined faith in Christ. The thoughtless bridesmaids on the other hand, are flighty and unprepared for the surprise midnight entrance of the bridegroom. The foolish bridesmaids represent shallow believers who are distracted and unprepared. The Lord comes down hard on them. He refuses to invite them into the ceremony, saying, “Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.” Jesus’ bottom line: “So keep alert because you just don’t know the day or the hour.” Readiness cannot be achieved by “last minute adjustments,” but depends on “long-term provision.”¹²

The Blessing

*Your sons will take the place of your fathers;
you will make them princes throughout the land.
I will perpetuate your memory [commemorate your name]
through all generations;
therefore the nations will praise you for ever and ever.*
Psalm 45:16-17

The marriage union is signified publicly in several ways: the wedding ceremony, the pledge of vows, the exchange of rings, and the giving and changing of a name. The bridegroom offers a name; the bride receives a name. The two are united under a new name. But there is another name more powerful and more enduring; the name that defines them and saves them. May they be known by that name. “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col 3:17).

The psalm concludes with a blessing pronounced over the royal couple. Their marriage will be a blessing to the generations and to the nations. The psalmist pledges to do his part in making the royal Name known for all generations. This is the Name that is like no other, for “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). This is the Name that is written on the robe and thigh of the rider who is called Faithful and True. He is the “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rev 19:11-16). This is the Name that is above every name, “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:9-11).

¹¹ R. T. France, Matthew, 947.

¹² Ibid., 947.

