



Widows Harvest MINISTRIES

In All Things Give Thanks to Our Heavenly Father In Christ Jesus Name | END-OF-THE-YEAR UPDATE 2022

Merry Christmas!



End-of-the Year Letter 2022

Dear Friends and Supporters:

Slowly but surely we are returning to our Pre-Covid ministry activities and routines. Thankfully, the widows are, once again, gathering in person each week for prayer. And those widows who do not yet feel comfortable gathering in person continue to be able to join with us via telephone conference call.

Helen Adams, who suffered through a life-threatening illness during Covid, was thankfully spared and has returned to coordinate meals for the widows along with her staff of widow volunteers: Sue Richards and Francis Martin.

Joyce Fears, who faithfully continued to lead the widow's prayer time via phone conference call during Covid is, once again, leading the widows in person. Joyce spreads God's love and joy and is such an encouragement to all of us every time we gather together for prayer and fellowship.

Dorothy Pride, one of our cherished widows, just turned 100 years old. And thanks to her daughter who brings her each week, she has been able to return in person. Many of the widows, in fact, who have also returned in person, are now in their mid-80's to mid-90's, including my mother, Beverly Jackson, who celebrated her 90th birthday this year.

Dane Boykin, our assistant director, sadly, is no longer with us. He has accepted a job with a ministry in Birmingham, Alabama, working with at-risk youth. He and his family are already, and will continue to be, greatly missed by all of us.

Tim English, who initially came on to oversee lawn care that we have been providing for widows for many years has transitioned to being Dick Mason's replacement. Dick served with this ministry from the very beginning, first, as a volunteer, and then as a full-time employee. Tim brings many gifts and talents and a willingness to learn and grow in God's grace through serving others, and of course, especially in the service of widows.

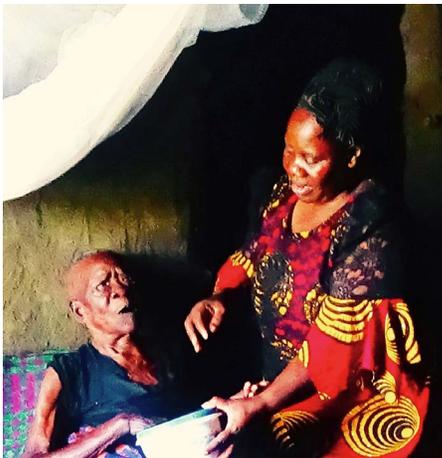
Lisa Eames continues to be such an invaluable staff member. Her administrative gifts and organizational abilities combined with such a willing heart for humbly serving others, makes it impossible to imagine how we would be where we are today without her.

Joshua & Abigail Atieno, who oversees Widows Harvest Africa, headquartered in Miwani, Kenya near the city of Kisumu, continue to be such an inspiration for their hearts for serving widows and providing them with opportunities for also ministering to others. Culturally, Kenya is a very patriarchal society, which makes Joshua, who is also a pastor, quite unique in that his regard for widows and their value as kingdom ambassadors is, indeed, rare. Over the years, though, he has steadily been able to make inroads with other pastors for changing the ways they regard widows from having no value or contributions, to one of recognizing them as being an invaluable prayer resource God has made available for the advancement of His kingdom.



(Joshua Kneeling Surrounded By Widow's Praying)

Abigail, his wife, I can never begin to say enough about. Her heart for leading the widows prayer ministry as well as leading the widows out into the countryside to visit with and minister to widows who are barely surviving on their own, having long been abandoned by family, friends and even their churches. As women, they were already considered to be of little value, but after becoming widows they are considered to have no value at all. Every time Abigail sends me pictures of her weekly visitations to widows by widows on Sundays after church, I am never prepared to see these very old, and often infirmed widows and the conditions of the small mud huts they live in with dirt floors below them and thatched roofs above them. Every time I hear people complaining here in American, especially Christians, about our economy, inflation and rising food and gas prices I can't help but think what a contradiction it is when, with the very next breath, we express our gratefulness to God for all that He has blessed us with.



“Me”. Over the years I have finally gotten the message that very little, if anything at all, has much to do with me. It’s all about God, and being all about God means that it is all about me/us being more like Jesus. No one will ever need to be more like Jesus more than me/us. And I can’t speak for anyone else, but for me serving with widows has meant learning from widows, and learning from widows has meant learning more about my/our relationship with Jesus as his bride (not a bridegroom).

For quite a number of years now I have been sharing my heart with the widows each week before they have their prayer time. In that much of the focus of my heart, I have found, has increasingly been for being able to relate to Jesus as a bride, which for men is a very foreign notion, I have come to the conclusion that to be more Christ-like means being more Christ bride-like.

Having said this I hope that you might bear with me as I try and explain what I mean by this. In some ways what Paul said in II Corinthians 11:1 when he prefaced what he was about to share with them with, “I hope you will put up with me in a little foolishness. Yes, please put up with me!”, though brief, was profoundly profound. The explanation that follows, I will apologize in advance, is neither brief, nor likely to be viewed as profoundly profound. Still, if you do happen to take the time to read it through, my sincere hope is that it will, at least, not have been considered a waste of time.

And now:

A Christmas Message From The Heart

Jesus Came For A Bride

Whether one believes that Jesus literally came for a bride (the church) or that the bride imagery is only symbolic, there are 4 women in particular, 3 of which are found in the Gospel of John and the 4th in the Gospel of Luke, though not recognized as such, I have come to believe represent for us our identity as a bride. In that all 4 women, not being unmarried at the time of Jesus’ encounter(s) with them, not only should be understood for representing the condition of the church/bride Jesus came to redeem, but also the future characterization of the church/bride under the new Covenant of Grace.

In that our condition apart from Jesus is one of spiritual widowhood and fatherlessness, it is more than reasonable that it would not only be women, but women bereft of a husband (widows) who might best characterize our spiritual condition.

Jesus’ Widowed Mother

In the Gospel of John, chapter 2, Jesus attends a wedding in Cana along with his disciples and his mother. This event is most widely identified with Jesus’ first miracle where he changes the water into wine. Certainly, it has also been understood to be a foreshadowing of the marriage of the lamb recorded in Revelation 19:7. Perhaps, what we have failed to recognize is Mary, the mother of Jesus being identified as symbolizing the bride that Jesus came to redeem. The stumbling block for us, of course, is because her identification is primarily as Jesus’ mother. It is, understandably, difficult to get beyond this identity and embrace the fact that after Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection she became equally identified as the church, thus Christ’s bride, along with all others who have accepted Jesus’ proposal of marriage since the time of his resurrection.

Even when considering the fact that Jesus never actually addresses Mary as “mother,” but always addresses her as “woman,” we have still been unable to get beyond identifying her as his “mother,” only.

The word “woman,” though, in this instance can mean “a woman of any age, whether a virgin, or married, or a widow.” When Jesus addresses her as “woman” in John 2:4, after she informs him that the wine has run out, he expands on her identity as mother to also include her being identified as having been a virgin bride, a married woman, and now a widow. And as a widow she both represents us as spiritual widows needing a redeemer/bridegroom, as well as the bride who will be joined with Jesus at the marriage of the lamb.

Perhaps, in order for us to be able to move beyond Mary only being identified by us as Jesus’s mother it is helpful for us to know and understand that Mary was God’s chosen vessel for carrying Jesus to term, but his actual conception included both God the father and the Holy Spirit’s participation and not just the latter.

In Luke chapter 2 when the angel told Mary that God had chosen her to give birth to His son, and she asked how this was possible since she was still a virgin, “The angel answered, ‘The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.’”

Rather than diminishing the significance Mary holds for us this knowledge should actually lead us to regard her with even more significance. Especially as a model for us for being the “pure as a virgin bride” described by Paul in II Cor. 11:2, that God desires us to be.

Not coincidentally, in addition to John’s account of Mary being with Jesus at the wedding in Cana and symbolizing the bride/church that Jesus came to redeem as a foreshadowing of the marriage of the lamb that will take place after the end of this age, is John’s account of Jesus’ last act on the cross, also involving Mary, making provision for her before giving up his ghost. Mary, being bereft of a physical husband and, therefore a widow, in that moment represents all of us who are bereft of a spiritual husband and that Jesus came to redeem for his bride. Again, Jesus addresses her as woman and places her in the care of John, “the disciple whom he loved.” Profoundly, it is through this last act that Jesus is calling attention to the fact that as the promised Messiah, just as he has made provision for Mary, his surrogate mother, and equally significant in that moment also being a physical widow, through the shedding of his own blood and the offering of his own life, he likewise makes provision for all of us in our fallen conditions as spiritual widows so that we might be his betrothed.

Mary Magdalene

Just as noteworthy is the fact that it is also a woman, Mary Magdalene, who first bears witness to Jesus’ resurrection. After all the disciples fled in fear (just as they did after Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane) after finding Jesus’ tomb was empty, Mary stayed behind and waited on him. (recent discoveries suggest that Mary may have actually been a rich widow and not a former prostitute as has been traditionally believed).

Jesus, likewise, also addresses this Mary as “woman,” and asks her why she is crying (John 20:15). Not recognizing him at first, Mary mistakes him for being the gardener. After it becomes clear to her, though, that the one who asked her “why she was crying” was Jesus she goes to the disciples, who are hiding behind a locked door, and proclaims to them the good news. The “good news” being that Jesus had been resurrected from the dead. She, who is now believed to have been a widow at the time, is quite literally the first evangelist. If Jesus had not been resurrected, then there is no gospel/good news to share. According to Strong’s concordance the definition of the word “Gospel” in addition to the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus also includes Jesus’ deeds leading up to his death. The “Good News” includes all of these, equally. Meaning that to leave any part of it out renders it a less than, or incomplete truth.

The Samaritan Woman

John 4:21-24, *“Woman,” Jesus replied, believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”*

Many different interpretations have been put forth for Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman, but recognition for her, perhaps, as symbolizing the bride that Jesus came to redeem may be the least of these. This encounter, though, not only reveals what Jesus came to do for us, but also the ways that our relationship with him, as his bride, will be expressed to him as worship through our daily acts/offerings of love in the service of others.

The Samaritan woman, who arrives with an empty clay vessel to fill with water only to return home without it, symbolizing that after her encounter with Jesus, who offered her living water, which she accepts, has likewise left her old self behind. Then she, symbolizing the bride Jesus came to redeem, becomes an evangelist, if you will. Not as one who is bearing witness to Jesus’ resurrection, yet to occur, but one much like John the Baptist, who bore witness to the arrival of God’s promised Messiah. When she returns back to the place where she had come from and encounters the people of her town she is quick to share with them all about Jesus’ and his imminent arrival. They too, initially accept Jesus based on her testimony, but then after hearing Jesus’ words in person “They said to the woman, ‘We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.’”

Likewise, when we first believe because of the testimony of someone else, it is only after we have personally encountered Jesus that we also truly believe.

Imagine those who heard the Samaritan woman’s testimony, that the man who was on his way revealed that he knew everything about her including the fact that she had been married 5 times and the man she was presently living with she was not even married to. Yet, rather than feeling judged by him, she received unconditional love and acceptance instead. These

same people hearing about this would have, more than likely, also known her history, and it is doubtful that their opinion of her was, to say the least, a positive one.

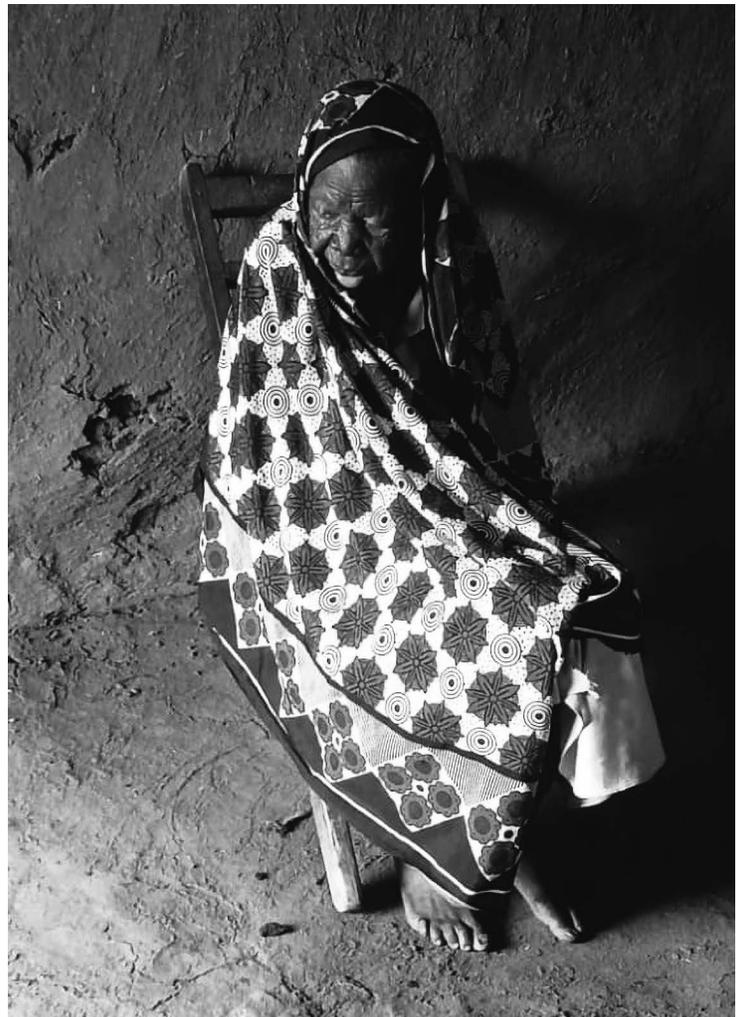
The marriage history of the Samaritan woman, though, is not unlike that of Israel's. How many times was she divorced by God and then taken back by Him? Not to mention the fact that at that present time God had, again, separated Himself from them? They had become so blinded by their own sin they didn't even realize that God had left the building, so to speak, and that they had replaced their relationship with him choosing instead to live in an adulterous relationship with the world.

Finally, it is the Samaritan woman who first brings up the subject of "worship," which then opens up the opportunity for Jesus to address what had been most absent from Israel's worship: "Acts of worship in Spirit and in truth." In Jesus' response to her he reveals that it will no longer be in Jerusalem, or even in the mountains where her forefathers worshiped, but worship will take place at all times and in all places. Perhaps, what yet remains most hidden today in this revelation that Jesus shares about worship is the reason that Jesus "had to go through Samaria on his way to Galilee" in the first place. The greatest reason being, and one that we continue failing to recognize, is that his encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, provides us with a literal, real life illustration for what worship in "Spirit and truth that God desires from His true worshippers" should really look like and take place.

The Widow At The Altar

In Mark 12, beginning with verse 38, Jesus warns his disciples to "watch out for the teachers of the law." Then he describes their actions as those "who like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, as well as having the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets." Then quite unexpectedly he adds, perhaps, where their greatest guilt might lie, "they devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers." It should really come as no surprise to us that immediately after pointing out to his disciples that "they devour the widows' houses," Jesus, points out and contrasts a poor widow putting all the money she has into the temple treasury with many other people giving large amounts out of their wealth, and/or surplus.

Jesus, though, who is both God and man, is privy to the hearts of men when making such judgments, whereas his disciples, being only men, generally base their judgments only on the outward appearances of others. Just as Jesus knows the religious leaders are guilty of "devouring the widow's houses" he likewise knows that this widow has put all she has in the temple treasury. Revealing for us that her giving is out of a depth of trust and faith in God that those who have been appointed to watch over and care for her most likely do not have. And as a result of their failure to recognize the widow's value and worth for the ways that God has set her apart for the advancement of the kingdom, especially through their prayers being expressed through their deep faith and trust in God, they only add to the day to day burdens of the widow "placing yokes around their necks crushing them beneath."



And as far as we know from the text Jesus had no personal interaction with this widow and, therefore, there is no record of her being addressed by him as "woman." Yet, the fact that Mark makes a point of identifying her as a widow, she should be included along with the other 3 women already discussed as representing, or symbolizing for us, on a spiritual level, our own conditions apart from Jesus, for being spiritually widowed. And beyond that she also symbolizes the characteristics of the church/bride that Jesus came to redeem, which is made plain for us, by his contrasting her with both the religious leaders as well as those who gave out of their wealth. They are a reflection of those who have been leavened by the yeast of the Pharisees and not by God.

It is not hard to imagine, though, who was being considered most esteemed by the other onlookers that were present. No doubt, this poor widow, if she was even noticed, would have been pitied, and judged to be someone who, as a poor widow, was deemed to have no real value based on her station in life as well her possessing nothing of value that could make any difference either for society and/or the administration of the religious system in place.

Yet, God has no need for our money. What is most important to Him is measured in the faith and trust we place in Him and the ways, based on that faith and trust, we demonstrate our love for him as well as our love for others. Everything else is perishable and only serves to glorify man. Indeed, only God is both great and glorious and worthy of our continuous offerings of thanksgiving and praise.

Who else, then, should we consider that more profoundly exemplifies this in the gospel accounts than this widow at the altar? Even though she was considered to be poor (and probably pitiful) by most worldly standards, she was rich in faith beyond measure based on God's kingdom standards. In the same way that Jesus called attention to her for his disciples he continues to draw attention to her for us who have accepted his proposal of marriage, as a model for the characteristics of the church/bride he came to redeem. Which was in stark contrast to the religious order at the time, and perhaps, yet remains much the same today.

Yet, the regard for those who are primarily considered to be most essential for the advancement of the kingdom of God remains almost entirely men. The realization that it was the male leadership, at the time, that Jesus confronted and condemned for their lack of mercy and compassion, seemingly, continues to be lost on us. Meanwhile, those women who best serve as models for us in our relationship with Jesus, as his redeemed bride, continue to be regarded as secondary in their importance. Which, at least based on Jesus calling attention to the faith of the widow at the altar in contrast to the self-aggrandizement of the religious leaders and those who gave out of their wealth, it is our faith in and dependence on God that most advances the kingdom of God regardless of gender or station in life.

Bone of My Bones, Flesh of My Flesh

In the Genesis account of the creation of Eve through Adam correlations can be drawn with Jesus that, unless coincidental, prove the sacrifice of his own life was for the redemption of his bride.

First, Adam is placed in a deathlike sleep (length of time unknown) in order for God to remove a rib from his side. Jesus dies a literal death (length of time known) before being pierced in the side with a spear.

Secondly, God removes a rib from Adam's side while he is still in a deathlike sleep (blood, we now know is manufactured in bone marrow and sustains life). After Jesus "gave up the ghost" (died a temporary death), he was pierced in the side with a spear shedding his blood (which we believe was eternal life giving).

Thirdly, God formed a woman out of the rib (the word for "rib," 19 out of the 41 times it is used is translated as "side" (like the side of the Ark of the Covenant) and only 2 times as "rib" with both being in the creation of Eve account) that he removed from Adam's side. Likewise, God redeemed a bride through the shedding of Jesus' blood after he was pierced in the side. (The word for "side" actually means rib, and by extension "side," and only appears 5 times. 4 of which are in reference to Jesus' wound and the 5th is when an angle strikes Peter, who is in a jail cell in a deathlike sleep, in the side, waking him up and setting him free (which so much more could be said about, but at another time, perhaps).

Fourth, after Adam woke from the death-like sleep he was in, he stated that "she is now bone of my bones and flesh of his flesh that she shall be called 'woman' for she was taken out of man. In similar fashion, but stated before his death, Jesus told his disciples after he broke and served them bread during the Passover meal the night he was betrayed, "take it and eat, this is my body." Which was followed, soon after, by the passing around of the cup of wine, telling them "This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Essentially telling his disciples, this bread and this blood is "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.

If making these correlations that have been drawn between the creation of Eve through the first Adam, and Jesus as last Adam, who through his death redeemed us for his bride are correct, then all those who accept Jesus' proposal of marriage symbolize "woman" as the correlation with the Genesis account of the creation of Eve. And as "woman," the one person who exemplifies her, perhaps, more than any other for us, is Mary; the mother of Jesus.

When we read in II Corinthians 11:2 where 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” he is, of course referring to the church. And since we know that the church includes both males and females with both having equal standing with God as the betrothed of Jesus, makes what Paul expresses that he fears for us in verse 3 even more critically important that we understand. “But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.”

In general, it would not be inaccurate to say that women have been exclusively associated with Eve and her vulnerability for being deceived. Yet, once we are betrothed to Jesus, the last Adam, a new lineage begins for us in him and all identification with the first Adam has been erased and is no longer traceable. However, in that Jesus came to redeem a bride, just as God created a bride for the first Adam, our vulnerability as the church, both male and female remains that of Eve for being deceived. And although, according to Paul, we can become deceived ourselves and consequently be the deceiver of others, unlike Eve, there are no circumstances by which Jesus can be deceived by us, if that were even possible.

Our unwillingness to accept, or even understand this, especially for men, Paul obviously understood. It is really the only explanation that satisfactorily explains the uncharacteristic way in which Paul prefaces, in verse 1, what follows in the next 2 verses of this same chapter. In verse 1 Paul begins in a way that comes across as being almost lighthearted when he starts out by saying, “I hope you will put up with me in a little foolishness.”

Until we fully understand what Paul reveals to us afterwards, and the implications for us as the church when we don’t, (i.e., that our minds may be led astray from our pure and sincere devotion to Jesus), the meaning behind his words in verse 1 come across for being almost nonsensical and are, therefore, overlooked for his actual intent for its significance. Which is made all too clear for us in his next sentence when his tone changes from one that comes across as being somewhat ambivalent to one that might be interpreted as someone pleading to be taken seriously because of the critical importance of what he is about to reveal: **“Yes, please put up with me!”**

Paul, no doubt, knew first hand what a great struggle it was to embrace an identity characteristically associated with women and not men. One might imagine, that he struggled as well to overcome what may have also struck him as foolishness. It is, after all, far more appealing to be a disrupter like Jesus was perceived to have been when he turned over the tables in the temple, rather than being a submissive bride like Mary.

Five, if we believe that once we are in Christ and dedicate ourselves to the preservation and perpetuation of the truth of the Gospel, teaching and preaching that Jesus died for our sins and was then resurrected for the dead, is often all the proof we need in order to convince ourselves that we have not been deceived, yet in reality, actually proves nothing. In verse 4 of chapter 11, after revealing that our vulnerability is that of Eve for being deceived, Paul explains that “If someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the Spirit you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, **“you put up with it easily enough.”**

And there we have it. Paul, in verse 1, pleads with us to **“please put up with him”** for the profound truth he is about to reveal to us, and he ends with what should be considered by us as a frightening prospect, that just as Eve was so easily deceived, with Adam following soon after, we the church/bride, are just as vulnerable **“to put up with it (deception) as easily,”** perhaps, as Eve did.

Lastly, after Adam called Eve “woman” because she was created out of man, God said, “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.” It probably comes as no surprise that a correlation can also be drawn from this to Jesus. In Ephesians 5:30-32 “...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.”

Paul, in fact, in all his letters is trying to help us to relate to Jesus, with him as our bridegroom and us his bride. But, because we (especially men) have not understood and embraced our relationship to Jesus as his bride, as in the case of Ephesians 5:22-29 (preceding Ephesians 5:30) which has been almost exclusively interpreted as instructions for a husband and wife in their physical, temporal marriage relationships with each other and who is required to be more submissive to whom, when in reality Paul is only using physical marriage to help us understand our spiritual marriages to Jesus where both men and women are to equally submit to him.

If we were only to begin by first reading verse 5:21, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ,” and next reading verse 5:33 “However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband,” before reading the verses in-between, it might become more apparent that Paul, could have, and probably should have, also prefaced these passages with **“Yes, please put up with me!”**

Christmas Time Is Coming

Celebrating the birth of Jesus each year brings with it such joy and generosity with believers and unbelievers alike. As believers, though, we should not only remember the birth of a savior but also the surrender of a virgin bride to the will of God. Jesus, at God’s appointed time suffered great humiliation and unimaginable torture, beginning with his arrest and ending when he “gave up the ghost” on the cross and died. Mary, undoubtedly, would have also suffered humiliation at the hands of family, friends and the religious leaders when they learned that she was pregnant long before the wedding ceremony took place. Mary also suffered great pain and sorrow throughout her life, beginning with the loss of her husband and becoming a widow and then personally witnessing the torture and murder of her firstborn son.

It is, of course, impossible for us to identify with the suffering of Jesus, because unlike us, he was born without sin and therefore did not deserve the suffering and death that was inflicted upon him. Mary, though, being fully human and born sinful, is far more relatable for us as a model for remaining “pure as a virgin.” Remembering that it was while Mary was still a virgin and betrothed to Joseph that God chose her to submit herself to His will and serve as His vessel through which his son would be born. Yet, she remained a virgin until she was presented to her husband, Joseph. And after the death of her physical husband, and no longer a virgin, through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, God’s own son, she would again become a virgin bride as Jesus’ betrothed. In the same way God chooses us, we do not find him, and when we accept His proposal of marriage we, likewise are to remain pure as a virgin until the marriage of the lamb where we will stand face to face with Jesus at the altar.

Indeed, as we strive to be Christ-like in all our ways in this life, it may actually be Mary, perhaps, who best serves as our model for remaining a virginal bride until we are presented to Jesus at the “marriage of the lamb. And as we approach the day when we will once again celebrate our Savior’s birth, let us also remember Mary, and all that she endured and now represents for us in our new identity as Christ’s betrothed.

Amen.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized set of initials followed by a long horizontal line that tapers to the right.