

HOME AND FAMILY IN BIBLE TIMES

Marriage Customs

In our country, a couple becomes legally married when it is so declared by someone to whom the state has given such authority. The proper papers are signed, filed, and the marriage becomes final. In other countries, particularly in those of the Middle East, there are other customs and events that declare men and women legally married. With the department stores trimmed these days in the reds and pinks of the coming Valentine's Day, we pause a moment to examine love and marriage customs in the days of the Old and New Testament believers.

Arranged Marriages

Unlike what we are used to, the choice of a particular spouse was not generally left up to the young person. Parents would find suitable men or women for their sons and daughters and it would be "arranged" ahead of time who would marry whom. The reason for this was that a bride, once married, would become a member of the household of her father-in-law. Thus the whole family had an interest in whether or not a "match" was suitable.

There is some evidence that occasionally a son or daughter was consulted. In Gen 24:58, Rebekah was asked if she was willing to be Isaac's wife.

To the eastern way of thinking, love came *after* marriage. Husband and wife were expected to love one another *because* they were married, not necessarily because of romantic feelings they had for one another before. Thus marriages were considered, as they ought to be, *commitments to do loving things for one another*. It could be argued that the custom of arranged marriages actually encouraged true Biblical love much more than our customs today encourage it (See Gen 24:67).

Marriage Negotiations

When a bride had been chosen for a groom, "friend of the bridegroom" would go to the bride's father (or his representative) and negotiate what was known as the *bride price* or *dowry*. The groom's family was expected to compensate the bride's family for the "loss" of their daughter—which could be significant since unmarried daughters often helped tend the flocks of their fathers or do other important work around the house. When the friend of the bridegroom had finished negotiations, coffee was typically drunk in celebration.

Part of the bride price was also to go to the woman to be married. This became her own personal wealth and could not be taken from her even if her husband should die or leave her. Often, this personal dowry included a circle of coins that was attached to the woman's head-dress. In the parable of the lost coin (Lk 15:8-10), part of the reason the widow is so disturbed is that the coin she had lost was part of her dowry.

Betrothal

Once the arrangement to marry was decided upon, it was time for the betrothal. This was a binding agreement that the couple would marry. A betrothal was a special covenant that could only be broken by a divorce. The betrothal was a serious legal agreement, as well as a serious commitment before God (Dt 20:7). It was more than our engagements are today. The betrothal period lasted one year, after which the wedding would take place.

During the time of the betrothal, the groom would be preparing the new house for the couple to live in, the bride would be preparing her wedding clothes, and the bride's family would be getting ready for the wedding festivities.

Wedding Night Preparations

When the day came for the wedding festivities, the bride and groom spent the day getting ready. The groom was dressed like a king (Is 61:10). If he could afford it, he would even wear a gold crown. His clothes would be scented with frankincense and myrrh. This would be the best-dressed moment of his entire life.

The bride was also decorated with elaborate and expensive things. She was literally adorned as a queen (Rev 21:2). Her attendants would work on her complexion (Ps 144:12), her hair, and her clothes (Eze 16:11-12). If the family was too poor to afford all the trimmings, they would borrow what they could from their friends to make the bride as beautiful as she could possibly be. The prophet Jeremiah made reference to the beauty of the bride in 2:32.



The Wedding Procession

At evening, the groom would go to the bride's house to bring her into his home for the wedding festivities. The friends and family of the bride would follow the couple in a procession to his house. Along the way, other friends would join the procession. Everyone needed to have a lamp full of oil or a torch, otherwise they were unable to take part (Mt 25:1-13). The procession was joyful and there was dancing and music-making along the way.

Arrival at the House

When the bride arrived at the house with the bridegroom, they sat together under a canopy in the house, and the wedding feast began. Once this happened, the couple was considered married. There was no particular pronouncement of marriage as we are used to, but throughout the feast, people would offer words of benediction and blessing (Ru 4:11). For seven days the wedding feast would continue as friends and relatives celebrated bride and groom's new life together. The wedding banquet was organized by the "ruler of the feast." It was his job to see that things went smoothly—that food, wine, and other details were attended to.

JESUS CHRIST, THE BRIDEGROOM

It is good to know and understand marriage customs in Biblical times, particularly because the New Testament makes frequent reference to marriage in describing our relationship with Jesus Christ. So close is the believer's relationship to be to his Savior that it is spoken of in the language of marriage. Jesus is the *Bridegroom*, and the Church (all believers) are His *bride*. Consider the following:

John the Baptist is the "Friend of the Bridegroom" in John 3:29.

How did John prepare the people for the coming of Jesus?

We are Betrothed to Jesus

We are preparing for the great "marriage" between Christ and His Church. In one sense, this has already happened (we are "married" to Christ by faith). In another sense, the great wedding is yet to come; for heaven is described in the Bible as the ultimate end of our "betrothal" to the Savior.

Jesus is Preparing His Home for Us

Just as a bridegroom prepares the home for his bride during the betrothal period, Jesus prepares His home for us (Jn 14:2).

We are Prepared for the Wedding through the Forgiveness of Sins

Eph 5:25-27 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to 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. (See also Rev 19:7-8).

The Wedding Procession

At the last day Jesus will gather His believers to be with Him. We ought to be ready at all times to join the procession (Mt 25:1-13; Hymns 67 and 609).

The Marriage Feast

Heaven is pictured symbolically as a wedding banquet in which we will enjoy presence and joy with the Lord Jesus forever.

Rev 19:9

Lk 14:15-24

Resources

Manners and Customs of Bible Lands by Fred H. Wight
Bible Times and Customs by Tim Gibson