

Series Revelation

Scripture #29 Revelation 19:1-9

We've known from the beginning of our study that the outcome of the book of Revelation is "The Victory of Jesus and His Followers Over Satan and His Helpers." I don't know if you are one of those people who reads the last chapter of a book first in order to find out how the story ends or not. That may be a form of cheating if you are reading a mystery story, but I would encourage believers to turn to the last part of this book to discover how everything turns out. The conclusion is really good!

God will be victorious because He is the absolute Sovereign over all creation. Knowing this, we might wonder why His promised victory has been such a long time coming. It is because God has had an unusual way of working out His purposes. Instead of "zapping" Satan and removing Adam and Eve and starting over, God chose a method of redemption whereby He seeks the love and loyalty and cooperation of individuals who will be obedient to His will. It has taken many centuries so far, but God has been steadily moving human history toward His goal of victory.

By means of this book, God has graciously provided information to us so that we may have confidence about the future. He will eventually bring to an end the rebellion and evil which has permeated creation. Even though this world is currently becoming an increasingly evil place, and it seems that evil is winning, the outcome is not in doubt.

Last week, in chapter 18, we were given a detailed description of the destruction of the great city of Babylon and what that represented. Earthdwellers were very sad when they saw the smoke of the burning city, but the inhabitants of heaven had a different reaction: "Rejoice over her, O heaven! Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets!" (*Revelation 18:20*).

In chapter 19 we have a continuation of this response from heaven. As we read, notice the series of shouted "hallelujahs" by the heavenly multitude.

Read Revelation 19:1-9

The first 5 verses of chapter 19 are actually the conclusion of the many verses in chapters 17 and 18 which described the fall of the great city Babylon. The first four “hallelujahs” celebrate the righteous judgments of God. The fifth one announces a momentous celebration, the marriage of the Lamb and His Bride.

The word “hallelu - jah” comes from two Hebrew words meaning “Praise Yahweh!” In our contemporary English, we say, “Praise the Lord.” In the Old Testament, invitations to “Praise the Lord” are usually accompanied by reminders of who God is and what He has done. This is also true in Revelation 19.

Notice the first statement: “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God.” The word “salvation” has a variety of connotations in Scripture. In the New Testament it has a rather exclusive meaning: salvation is freedom from the power and dominion of sin, a freedom based on the atonement made available by the death of Jesus on the cross. The reason for the “hallelujah” in verse 1 is a little different. In the Old Testament, the general idea of “salvation” often has to do with physical safety and deliverance, as indicated in phrases such as “the Lord delivered His people from their enemies.” This Old Testament meaning is closer to the context of Revelation.

Back in chapter 7 John was given a vision of the servants of God who were sealed with the mark of the living God. This mark did not prevent their physical martyrdom, but it guaranteed that those who were faithful would be in the presence of God. John wrote that “there was a great multitude” of these servants “from every nation, tribe, people group, and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.” They were crying out with a loud voice “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb” (*Revelation 7:3, 9-10*). In the context of that vision, “salvation” was used in the sense of eternal protection and the fulfillment of God’s promise.

If what I am saying is true, then we can make an assumption about the people in heaven who were shouting. They would be those individuals who had been faithful unto death, who had been “redeemed from the earth” and had been waiting for God to avenge their deaths.

In chapter 14, John was given another vision of these believers. In that vision they were standing on Mount Zion with the Lamb. They had the “name of the Lamb and the Father’s name written on their foreheads” (*Revelation 14:1-3*). This is the same multitude which is shouting their “hallelujahs” in chapter 19. Their prayers have finally been answered. They are thankful that the judgments of God are “true and just,” and that God has “condemned the great prostitute,” and has “avenged the blood of his servants.”

There is another reason to assume that the “shouters” in heaven are not angels: in Scripture angels do not sing of salvation. In their praises to God in this book, they sing about power, riches, wisdom, might, honor, glory, and blessing (*see 5:12 and 7:12*) but they do not experience the salvation of humans. In one of the hymns of a previous generation, the refrain expresses this truth very well:

“When I sing salvation’s story, angels fold their wings
For angels never felt the joys that our salvation brings.”

Let me interject another thought here. The judgments described in this book are just and fair. This is emphasized several times. The severity of the judgments is a reflection of the holiness of God. As the descendants of Adam and Eve, we cannot fully comprehend the extensiveness and pervasiveness of sin, but God does. Victory over the disobedience of Adam and Eve required the death of Jesus, God’s Son, and also requires the eventual and thorough purging of all evil from the physical creation. Scripture emphasizes over and over that “the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether” (*Psalms 19:9*). God is not petty and vindictive in His actions, but rather, honest to His holy nature.

In verse 3 there is a second shout of “Hallelujah!” The reason here has to do with the permanence of Babylon’s judgment – it will go on “forever and ever.” The evil of Babylon has been judged and she has received a sentence that is eternal without the possibility of reversal. God is eternal, and because He cannot tolerate any kind of evil, the righteous condemnation of the prostitute must last forever.

The third “hallelujah” is voiced by the 24 elders and the four living creatures. These are the heavenly beings who circle the throne of God (*see Revelation 4:6b-10*). In this and in four previous passages, they are described as “falling down and worshipping” the One seated on the throne. They seem to be the worship leaders of heaven. This group does not offer any new reasons for their worship. Rather they affirm the statements of the previous group, crying “Amen! Hallelujah!” The word, “amen,” has the meaning “so be it,” and “may it be true.”

In verse 5 John heard a single voice. [*Note: Although the voice came from the throne, it cannot be the voice of either the Father or the Lamb. If either of them were speaking, they would not say, “praise our God.”*] The phrase, “praise our God,” has the same meaning as “hallelujah.” The invitation to “praise” is directed to “all the servants of God.” The word translated here as “servant” also can mean “slave” and refers to the position of people who are “owned” by God. This is apparently not a specific group such as the glorified martyrs, but a larger group of believers comprised of all those who “fear” God, both “small and great.” We can assume that they are the entire body of redeemed believers. They come from every socio-economic level, and represent every stage of spiritual maturity.

Now we come to the most exciting part of this passage. The judgment of Babylon has been celebrated, so the vision moves on to proclaim the final steps in the triumph of Jesus over the forces of evil. Beginning with verse 6 and proceeding through chapter 20, John’s attention will be directed to various events connected with the great victory of Jesus at His second coming. The first of these events is announced here by a great multitude.

John hears the sounds of but does not see those who are shouting. He describes the shouting as like the “roar of rushing waters and peals of thunder.” The reason for the enthusiasm is understandable: “Our Lord God Almighty reigns.” The verb here is actually past tense, so the statement is really “Our Lord God Almighty has begun to reign,” and because of that fact, there is reason to “rejoice and be glad and give him glory!”

That’s very exciting, but the real reason for the enthusiasm by this group is “the wedding of the Lamb has come.” The “wedding of the Lamb” is an event highly anticipated by believers. It is, in the minds of believers, the event in which the Church will enter into the fullness of relationship with Jesus. It is an event of such significance and intimacy that it can only be compared to the uniting of a bride and groom in marriage.

The imagery of a wedding ceremony, with all the activities which were associated with the occasion, was very familiar to both the Jews in the Old Testament and believers in the early New Testament Church. In fact the ancient customs are still followed in Middle Eastern and Asian countries. A marriage involved two major events, the betrothal and the wedding.

The betrothal period was like an engagement, only more binding than understood by people in modern western countries. It began when a couple made a commitment to each other by signing a contract. During the betrothal period the couple were considered husband and wife even though they were not permitted to live together. The anticipated marriage could only be broken with a decree of divorce.

You will remember that this was the situation with Mary and Joseph when Mary was discovered to be pregnant. The Gospel of Matthew explained the circumstances this way: “Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly” (*Matthew 1:18-19*). Fortunately, God forestalled that action.

The betrothal period could last for months or even years. When it was finally time for the consummation of the relationship, the groom would lead a procession to the bride’s house. The bride and her entourage would then be escorted to the house of the groom, and that’s when there would be the official ceremony and the celebration of the marriage feast.

By analogy, this is the experience of the Church. Believers here on earth become betrothed to Christ by making a faith commitment. They then must wait for the end of the age when the groom, Jesus, will bring them into His presence. That’s when the betrothal ends and it is time for the Church to enter into her full experience of salvation and glory with her bridegroom. The Church is called the Bride of Christ four times in these last chapters of Revelation. We will think about this in a more thorough way in chapters 21 and 22.

At the end of verse 7, we are informed that the Bride of Jesus “has made herself ready.” Normally Bible believing Christians insist that redemption is altogether the work of God, that “it is by grace that we have been saved, through faith, and this not from ourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, so that no one can boast” (*Ephesians 2:8-9*). However, there is a sense in which the individual believer is responsible for his/her own spiritual well-being. Paul stated this responsibility in these words: “Since we have been given great promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” (*II Corinthians 7:1*).

In his letter to the churches, the Apostle John wrote, “We know that when He (Jesus) appears, we shall be like him, ... Everyone who has this hope in him (Jesus) purifies himself just as he is pure” (*I John 3:2-3*). What this means is that the individual believer is responsible to live in obedience and faithfulness to Christ. That is a responsibility which has been emphasized numerous times in this book, as well as throughout the New Testament.

The next statements are related to this thought. Verse 8 mentions that appropriate clothing is given to the Bride. This glorious raiment has two qualities: brightness and cleanness, qualities which are appropriate for the glorification and purity of redeemed people. There is a thought-provoking statement about this clothing in chapter 7: Their robes were “made ... white in the blood of the Lamb” (*Revelation 7:14*). How should we understand this statement?

Note that the fine linen garments that the Bride is wearing “stands for the righteous acts of the saints.” “Righteous acts” refer to obedience; to actions which are pleasing to God. The statement means that those who will be married to Jesus have kept the commandments of God and been faithful to Him throughout the betrothal period. This is how the Bride has made herself ready. “Righteous acts” do not imply any kind of meritorious works that would earn salvation. However, there is a balance between God’s grace and the believer’s obedient response to grace. Righteous deeds follow salvation as the necessary proof that regeneration has occurred. The proper balance was expressed by James when he wrote: “Faith without works is dead” (*James 2:26*), and by Paul, “work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and act according to his good purpose” (*Philippians 2:12-13*).

Verse 9 emphasizes the blessedness of those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb. The word translated “invited” also means “called.” The point is that people cannot come to the feast on their own merits. They must be given a divine summons, a “call.” Paul stated this clearly when he wrote: “God has saved us and called us to a holy life, not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time” (*II Timothy 1:9*). Paul also wrote: “From the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” (*II Thessalonians 2:13-14*).

If God has called us into His kingdom, to be a member of His family, then our responsibility is to follow His ways obediently and consistently, to live as kingdom people. Built into His call is the promise, the guarantee, that we will be joined with our Savior and Lord in marriage for eternity.

There is a wonderful prophecy in Isaiah about this great feast. “On this mountain (Mount Zion) the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine, the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. ... In that day they will say, ‘Surely this is our God; we trusted in him and he saved us. This is the LORD, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation’” (*Isaiah 25:6-9*).

The angel concluded his blessing with words of assurance: “These are the true words of God.” John was, and we are, given assurance of this coming events. I’m glad we know the end of the story.