

A Heavenly Hallelujah
Revelation 18:4-5; 19:1-10
Rev. Brian Bill
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I am so grateful to Pastor Dan for stepping in to preach a powerful message last weekend while I was sick. I don't remember being that wiped out from the flu in a long time. Being one who likes to share things with others, I think I became "patient zero," as I ended up infecting many staff and deacon team members. At one point, only Sheila and Pastor Chris on the ministry team remained standing! You may not want to get too close yourself, though I am feeling much better.

Some of you who have been members of Edgewood for decades remember the earnest emphasis years ago on being separated from the world and living differently from the culture around us to avoid being infected by its influence. This involved how Christians should dress, what music to listen to, what movies could be watched (if any), keeping Sunday sacred, where Christians could go, who Christians could associate with, and the importance of avoiding alcohol.

A well-known phrase was, *"I don't dance, I don't smoke, I don't chew or go with girls who do."* And that wasn't just an Edgewood thing. It was part of the Baptist world in which this church grew and developed.

After all, since we belong to Jesus Christ, we shouldn't look, talk, think, and live exactly like the world.

- Romans 12:2 urges, ***"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind..."***
- James 4:4 says, ***"You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God."***
- 1 Peter 1:15-16: ***"But as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'"***
- And Jesus, praying for His disciples in John 17:15-18, captured the tension perfectly: ***"I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world."***

That's always been the challenge: *While we are sent into the world, we must be separate from the world.*

Some churches once preached separation too rigidly, and many churches today hardly preach it at all. In reacting against legalism, many have embraced license. The danger on one side was adding to Scripture; the danger on the other side is subtracting from Scripture. Both are deadly distortions that keep the church from living faithfully in a world that is passing away.

We could say it like this: *To be in the world, and not of the world, we must focus not on legalism or license, but on loyalty to the Lamb.*

Revelation 18 brings this issue into sharp focus because it contains the funeral song for Babylon, which represents the world's seductive system of idolatry, immorality, and self-exaltation. In verses 4-5, God issues a clear and urgent command: ***"Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, 'Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest your share in her plagues, for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities.'"***

The call to separate from sin is unmistakable. God's people are to be in the world but not of the world; present but not polluted; engaged but not entangled. Instead of compromising by becoming spiritual chameleons, we're to come out of the world.

Revelation 18 reminds us that the church must resist both extremes. We must not retreat into legalism, *and* we must not drift into license. Instead, we're called to walk the narrow, joyful, Christ-centered path of holiness so that we may live loyally for the Lamb who redeemed us. Here's the question before us: *How do we live in the world without letting the world live in us?*

Because we already spent an entire sermon on Babylon several weeks ago, and I was out sick last weekend, we're going to move to the good news of Revelation 19 today. After a long section on judgment in chapters 8-18, the whole mood changes to joy in these closing chapters. The seals have been opened, the trumpets have sounded, and the bowls have been poured out. We move from Babylon to the Bride and from woes to worship as we await His final appearing!

Here's our main idea: *When we don't understand what God is doing, we can always affirm who He is by exclaiming, "Hallelujah!"*

I'm reminded of the man who bought a donkey from a preacher. Before completing the sale, the preacher told the man, *"This donkey has been trained in a unique way. The only way to make the donkey go forward is to say, 'Hallelujah!' and the only way to make it stop is to say, 'Amen.'"*

The man was excited to hear this, so he jumped on his new donkey, and exclaimed, *"Hallelujah!"* The donkey began trotting. Sure enough, when he shouted, *"Amen,"* the donkey stopped immediately. With a Hallelujah he took off and traveled for a long time through the mountains. As he neared the edge of a cliff, he forgot the command to make the donkey stop so he shouted out, *"Stop. Halt. Turn around,"* but nothing worked. In desperation, he decided to pray: *"Please, dear God, make this donkey stop before I go off this mountain. In Jesus' name, AMEN."*

The donkey came to an abrupt stop, just one step from the edge of the cliff. The man was so relieved that he threw his hands into the air and shouted, *"HALLELUJAH!"*

That humorous story reminds us of a serious truth: when the circumstances of life are pushing us toward the edge and we cannot remember what to do, we can still remember who God is.

The Hebrew worship word, *"Hallelujah!"* is used four times in the first six verses: *"After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying out, 'Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants.' Once more they cried out, 'Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up forever and ever.' And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who was seated on the throne, saying, 'Amen. Hallelujah!' And from the throne came a voice saying, 'Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, small and great.' Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, 'Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.'"*

Rather than translating "Hallelujah" into Greek, John brings it directly from the Hebrew into the text. It's a combination of two words: *"Hallelu,"* which means, "praise" and *"jah,"* which is a shortened form of "Yahweh," the covenant name of God. So, "Hallelujah" means, "Praise Yahweh." These are the only four

occurrences in the New Testament and it's no accident they're related to the final return and reign of Christ! Don't miss another important detail: **"Hallelujah!"** is a command, not a suggestion. We're exhorted to praise Yahweh always.

1. Praise Him in worship. Verse 1 begins with the phrase **"after this,"** which can be translated, **"after these things."** This signals a change of focus.

Notice three ways we're prompted to praise.

- **Remember His salvation, glory, and power.** The end of verse 1 tells us what the multitude is praising God for: **"...crying out, 'Hallelujah!' Salvation and glory and power belong to our God."** Each of these three attributes utilize the definite article by way of emphasis: **"the salvation, the glory, the power."** Salvation has its source in God because He alone can save. Glory belongs to God because He alone is weighty and worthy. Power belongs to God because He alone is Lord over all.
- **Recognize His just judgments.** Verse 2 emphasizes a theme we've seen throughout Revelation, that God's ways are just and right: **"...for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants."** God does not make mistakes in His judgments, and He never gets it wrong. Babylon may have seemed powerful and untouchable, but God always has the final word.

Notice what happens in verse 3: **"Once more they cried out, 'Hallelujah!' The smoke from her goes up forever and ever."** The worship of heaven is a reminder that God's justice is worth celebrating, even when His judgments are difficult for us to comprehend.

- **Rest in His sovereign reign.** We see this in verses 4-6: **"And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who was seated on the throne, saying, 'Amen. Hallelujah!' And from the throne came a voice saying, 'Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, small and great.' Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, 'Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.'" Notice the word "Amen" is inserted before the third use of "Hallelujah" and is translated as "so be it," signifying agreement and approval. When used at the beginning of a sentence it means, "truly."**

The sound of this multitude worshipping was as loud as cascading waterfalls and as deafening as peals of thunder. I appreciate Charles Spurgeon's insight, *"We ought not to worship God in a half-hearted sort of way; as if it were now our duty to bless God, but we felt it to be a weary business... come, my heart, wake up and summon all the powers which wait upon thee! Mechanical worship is easy, but worthless. Come rouse yourself, my brother! Rouse thyself, O my own soul!"*

The title **"Almighty"** is used 10 times in Revelation, the most of any New Testament book. It literally means, *"the One who holds all things in His control,"* emphasizing God's sovereign rule and reign over judgment, history, and consummation. Psalm 93:1 says: ***"The Lord reigns; he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed; he has put on strength as his belt. Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved."***

When we don't understand what God is doing, we can always affirm who He is by exclaiming, "Hallelujah!"

We move now from worship to a wedding.

2. Prepare for His wedding. In the Old Testament, the metaphor of marriage describes the covenant relationship between God and Israel, who was often unfaithful and fickle. Jeremiah 31:32 says, ***"...my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD."*** In the New Testament, that picture is applied to Christ and His church, where Jesus is the Bridegroom, and the church is His bride. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 11:2, ***"For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ."***

That marriage imagery helps us understand Revelation 19. There were several stages in a Jewish wedding that provide helpful background for this passage:

- **Betrothal: promises are made.** The bride and groom become legally pledged in a binding commitment to one another, which could only be broken by a divorce. In a spiritual sense, this pictures our relationship with Christ beginning at salvation. We belong to Him because we have trusted in Him.

- **Preparation: the bride and groom get ready.** During the waiting period, preparations are made for the wedding. The bride prepares herself, and the groom prepares a place for his bride. This is what's behind John 14:2-3: ***“In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”***
- **Procession: the groom comes for his bride.** Finally, at a time deemed right, the groom and his attendants come to receive the bride who is dressed to meet Him. Jesus repeatedly emphasized the importance of being ready for His coming. Matthew 25:1–13 pictures ten virgins waiting for the bridegroom, and ends with this warning: ***“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”*** This provides a helpful picture of Christ coming for His church.
- **Wedding feast: the celebration begins.** After the bridegroom receives his bride, there is a joyful celebration. In Jewish culture, this marriage supper was the best banquet or party anyone knew. Heaven will erupt in praise because the long-awaited union of Christ and His church has reached its appointed celebration.

With that as background, let's consider how to prepare for the wedding in verses 7-10: ***“Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure’— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.’ And he said to me, ‘These are the true words of God.’ Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, ‘You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God.’ For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”***

- **Rejoice in your relationship.** We're given an invitation in the first part of verse 7: ***“Let us rejoice and exult and give Him the glory...”*** The idea is to be ***“exceedingly glad and leap for joy”*** because of all that has been accomplished on our behalf by Jesus. In our culture, all attention is on the bride during a wedding.

When we got married, Beth radiated and glowed while all eyes turned to gaze on her beauty. I didn't even pay to get a haircut, and was sporting a scrawny mustache, and no one even noticed. In Revelation, as the Bridegroom stands to take His bride, He will be the focus of attention. The bride is blessed, but the Bridegroom gets the glory.

- **Ready yourself.** It's important for the church, as the bride of Christ, to be prepared for His return. Listen to the second part of verse 7 and verse 8: *"...for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure – for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints."* Revelation 21:2 says, *"...prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."*

Notice the beautiful balance in these verses. The bride *"has made herself ready,"* but it was also *"granted her"* to be clothed in fine linen. Ephesians 5:25-27: *"...as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish."*

While Christ cleans us up, we're also to be involved in *"righteous deeds."* The righteousness of Christ is imputed to us at salvation, *and* we're called to work out our sanctification through righteous deeds. Christ gives the garment, yet the bride wears it. Jesus the bridegroom makes us holy, yet we pursue holiness because grace produces godliness.

We must work out externally what Christ has worked in us internally. This is spelled out in Philippians 2:12-13: *"...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure."*

- **Respond with proper worship.** In verse 9, a blessing is pronounced on those who are invited to the wedding celebration: *"And the angel said to me, 'Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.' And he said to me, 'These are the true words of God.'"* What an incredible statement! God's promises about this coming celebration are not wishful thinking. They are the true words of God.

Verse 10 records how John is so overwhelmed by the wedding scene that he almost worships the wrong person. The angel immediately redirects him: ***“Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, ‘You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God.’ For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”***

As we wrap up, can I ask you what you’re wearing? Are you dressing yourself in the soiled and stained rags of Babylon as you flirt with license and let the culture live inside you? Or are you caught in the trap of legalism, thinking your own religious performance is what earns you a seat at the table?

Have you lost your focus on getting ready for the return of the Bridegroom for His church? Brothers and sisters, we’re called to be in the world, but not of the world. When the pressures of this life push you to the edge of the cliff, when your circumstances don’t make sense, when the flu knocks you flat, remember who you belong to and spend the rest of your life worshipping Him as you prepare for the wedding to come.

There’s one more question we cannot avoid: *Have you accepted the invitation to a relationship with Christ?* Revelation 19:9 pronounces a blessing on those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb. This is not an invitation to be admired. It is an invitation to be accepted.

It’s time to respond. John 1:12 says, ***“But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God.”***

When we don’t understand what God is doing, we can always affirm who He is by exclaiming, “Hallelujah!”

Live ready, because the Bridegroom is coming back for His bride.

Invitation prayer.