

“Hallelujah!” (Revelation 19:1–10)

August 15, 2021

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Christians have their own strange language. Sometimes, we use words that aren't uncommon, but we use them in a particular way. I'm thinking of words like “saved,” “faith,” and “grace.” Sometimes, we use theological language, and we talk about concepts like atonement or justification. At other times, we use words that no one else seems to use. One of those words is “hallelujah” or “alleluia.” Do you know what that word means? It's a transliteration of a Hebrew phrase that means “praise Yahweh,” or praise God. In our translations of the Old Testament, the Hebrew phrase is translated, “Praise the LORD.” So, when someone shouts out, “Hallelujah!” or, more commonly, we sing, “Hallelujah” or “Alleluia,” we're just praising God.

Of course, Christians believe some things that probably seems strange to the world. One of those things is that the most important thing we can do is praise God, or honor him, or give him glory. The most important thing we can do is love God with all our being, and that includes praising him. Of course, it's also important to love people, but that's the second greatest thing we can do. The greatest actions we can perform and the greatest postures of our hearts center on God, because he is the greatest being.

Today, we're going to look at the only passage in the Bible where we read the word “hallelujah.” (There are several Psalms that have that Hebrew phrase, but they're translated, “Praise the LORD,” so this the only place in the English Bible where we read that word.) This passage is in the beginning of Revelation 19. And as we see read this passage and think about its meaning, we're going to think about why we should praise God. It would be strange to talk about praising God without thinking about why he is praiseworthy. We don't praise God for no reason on at all, or for arbitrary reasons. We have some very good reasons to praise, or worship, God. And we'll see some of those reasons in this passage.

Let's start by reading Revelation 19:1–5:

¹ 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,

² 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.”

³ Once more they cried out,

“Hallelujah!
The smoke from her goes up forever and ever.”

⁴ And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who was seated on the throne, saying, “Amen. Hallelujah!” ⁵ And from the throne came a voice saying,

“Praise our God,
all you his servants,
you who fear him,
small and great.”¹

We’ve been studying the book of Revelation for about seven months now. It’s the final book of the Bible, and it’s very different from most of the Bible in terms of its style, or genre. It’s a book that describes images given from God to a man named John, most likely the apostle John, one of Jesus’ first followers. But here, we’re told what John hears. He hears sounds of celebration.

John hears a multitude, which is most likely the multitude of God’s people, those who have a right relationship with God. These are the people who are described in the book as conquerors, the ones who have been redeemed by the work of Jesus, the Son of God. These are the people who entrust their lives to Jesus, because he is King of kings, Lord of lords, and the world’s only Savior, and he is eminently trustworthy.

This multitude cries out, “Hallelujah!” In fact, they say this twice. And this cry is echoed by the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures, these heavenly beings that we first encountered in chapter 4. These beings seem to represent all of God’s people and all of creation, but they themselves might better be classified as angels.

What I want to think about this morning is why they’re praising God. After the first “Hallelujah” we’re given some reasons. We’re told that salvation and glory and power belong to God. We’re told that God’s judgments are just and true. We’re told that he judged Babylon, the great prostitute. And we’re told that he avenged his people.

¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Let's think about that a bit more. First, salvation and glory and power belong to God. Power is easy enough to understand. God is all-powerful. There is nothing logically possible that he can't do. There's nothing that he desires to do that he can't do. He created the whole universe and all that is in it. He keeps the whole universe in existence at every moment. There is simply no one like God. No one else can even begin to compare to God in terms of his power.

God's glory is often understood in terms of his brilliance. His glory is sometimes understood in terms of a brilliant light (Luke 2:9). The Greek word translated as "glory" can mean praise—God is the most praiseworthy being. The Hebrew word translated as "glory" can mean weight—God is the weightiest being in the sense that he is the most important being, and he should carry great weight in our lives.

Salvation might be more difficult to understand, at least for those who aren't familiar with the Bible. Today's secular person, someone not raised in church, might ask, "Salvation from what?" The answer is salvation from judgment, from condemnation, from hell. The Christian story says that God made us to praise him. We fail to praise him, we fail to love him, and we fail to love each other. We break his commandments, and we end consequently end up breaking his creation. God has every right to judge the guilty, to punish them. But God didn't fully punish the first humans when they sinned, and he doesn't fully punish us for our sin now. God is patient. He is merciful. But the book of Revelation reminds us again and again that there will be a day of judgment. On that day, all who are guilty and who have not had their guilt removed by Jesus will be condemned, cast into hell for eternity. That's a frightening reality.

But God is gracious, and he saves some of us from condemnation. Ultimately, that is God's work alone. That is because another part of the Christian story is that we can't save ourselves. Even our best efforts come up short, because they're always focused on ourselves. Even our best acts are in some way tainted by sin, by pride, by the desire to serve and love ourselves only. And the fact is that all of us go on sinning. Only God can save, and the Bible says in many ways that God does. If we have come to know God, if we have been saved from condemnation, then we should praise God for this undeserved gift, what we call "grace."

I'm going to say more about the Christian story of salvation later. But now let's think about God's judgments. We're told that God's judgments are true and just. Why is that praiseworthy? Well, think about our judgments. We often fail to judge people and situations rightly. Think about all the decisions that we make. How often have we gotten things wrong?

You can think about small decisions, ones that don't seem to carry any moral weight. How often have we thought, "I shouldn't have picked this lane," while in a traffic jam on the highway? How often have we thought, "I really shouldn't have eaten that," after an enormous meal or a gluttonous snack? More seriously, how often have we misjudged people based on a false first impression? Jesus himself once said, "Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment" (John 7:24). How often have we made bad judgments in life about weighty matters?

If we're being honest, it's clear that we've all made some bad judgments. But God is a perfect judge. There are two reasons why God is a perfect judge: One is that he knows all the evidence. Even the best human judges can make wrong judgments when they are not presented with all the relevant evidence. But God knows everything. There is no data that he hasn't considered. One reason we often make wrong judgments is because we're ignorant. But God has always known every truth. The second reason why God is a perfect judge is because he has a perfect character. We can make wrong judgments even if we know the relevant facts because we want something other than the truth. We can make wrong judgments because we don't interpret the facts rightly, because we lack wisdom. But God is perfectly wise, and his desires are perfect. He won't disregard the evidence in order to do something foolish or evil. The same cannot be true of us.

The other reason why God is praised here is because he has judged the great prostitute, who is also known as Babylon. I talked about this over the course of the last two weeks, when we read chapters 17 and 18. The whole realm of sinful humanity, the realm of people raging against God and putting their trust in created things, is called Babylon, which in the Bible represents a city or kingdom opposed to God. Babylon could represent Wall Street or Hollywood or the local mall. Babylon could represent anything, any place, and any people not devoted to God. Anything or anyone faithless to God, who has sold itself out to the highest dollar, is this great prostitute. And Babylon will come crashing down on that great day of judgment. All the monuments erected to glorify ourselves will come crashing down.

Additionally, God will avenge his people. He will avenge those who were martyred, the innocent people who were killed simply because they followed Jesus. Their murders will not go unpunished. God will punish evil.

The fact that God will punish evil should be a reason to praise him. We want God to punish the Hitlers of the world. We want God to judge genocidal maniacs. We want God to

judge terrorists, like those who belonged to ISIS. Right now, we see the Taliban reemerging in Afghanistan, and there are reports of the evils they are committing. We want God to avenge those who were killed by such groups. We want God to judge the murderers and rapists. The fact that God will judge in the end means that justice will be done. No evil will go unpunished. That is cause for praise.

What we often don't want, however, is for God to judge the evils we commit. We often think that we're not so evil. I'm guessing that no one here has committed murder or rape. If we've stolen things, well, they were probably of small value. We're not so bad as to deserve God's punishment, are we? Well, the fact is we all have failed to love God and obey him. We have also failed to love people, to treat them as we should. We have failed to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. And the result of this failure to love properly is a broken world. We break promises, relationships, families, organizations, the environment, and just about everything we touch. God does not want this breaking, this destruction, to go on forever. He intends to refashion the world so that it is perfect. He can't do that without first removing all sin, which is evil, rebellion, lawlessness. The fact that God is going to remove all evil and punish all sin is a reason to praise God. God is a God of love and mercy and grace, but he's also a God of justice. And he judges because he loves. He loves his people, he loves his creation, and he loves his glory.

If there's any concern that God is somehow selfish, that it is wrong for God to demand praise and glory, we should consider this: God is one being who exists in three persons. This is the Trinity: God is Father, Son, and Spirit. This teaching is mysterious and hard to grasp, I admit. But it means that God is inherently other-focused. The Father loves the Son and the Spirit, the Son loves the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit loves the Father and the Son. The three persons love and glorify each other. And it is right for God to love and glorify himself this way, because God is the most loving and glorious being. But it's a comfort to know God's love of others spills out toward his people, and we will see that in second half of today's passage.

Let's now read Revelation 19:6–10:

⁶Then 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.

⁷ 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;
⁸ it was granted her to clothe herself
with fine linen, bright and pure”—

for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

⁹ 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.” ¹⁰ 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.

Once again, John hears the multitude, but now their voices are amplified. Their voice is like roaring waters and peals of thunder. And, once again, they cry out, “Hallelujah!” They praise God because he reigns. There’s a sense in which God always reigns. He always rules over his creation, and he always governs the affairs of his creation in some sense. But on that great day of judgment, God’s reign will become obvious. He will put an end to all those who rebel against his reign and rule. All rebellion will cease, and he shall reign forever and ever.

But there’s another reason for praise: “the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready.” And this leads us to think about the Christian story from one particular angle. In the Bible, the relationship between God and his people is likened to a marriage. This is a metaphor, and we don’t want to push metaphors too far, so as to be too literal. If we do that, we might arrive at some strange thoughts. But the metaphor of marriage is a fitting one. We were made to be in an exclusive, faithful, loving relationship with God. He is supposed to be the only object of our worship, the ultimate object of our praise, adoration, love, and trust. And, in the Bible, we find the story of a marriage.

This story begins with God marrying a certain people, Israel. There is a sense that when God rescued Israel out of slavery in Egypt, where their lives were miserable, and when he brought them to freedom and to himself, God married his people. At Mount Sinai, he made a covenant with them, and marriage is a covenant (Mal. 2:14). A covenant is a binding pact made between two parties, a pact that has not only legal obligations, but also establishes a relationship. In this case, God gave Israel his law, which spelled out their obligations to him, but God also expressed his love to Israel, and he expected their love in return. Ezekiel 16 describes God

finding Israel “naked and bare.” He covered her nakedness and made her beautiful (see Ezek. 16:6–14). In Jeremiah 2:2, God says to Israel,

I remember the devotion of your youth,
your love as a bride,
how you followed me in the wilderness,
in a land not sown.

That sounds lovely. But we know that honeymoons run their course, and marriage isn’t always easy. In this case, God was not to blame. God never fails. But Israel proved herself faithless. In that same passage in Jeremiah 2, God says that Israel went far from him, in order to pursue worthless things, false gods. And because we become like what we worship, Israel became worthless. Instead of thanking God for his salvation and provision, Israel complained and then chased after the idols of their age (see Jer. 2:5–8). Ezekiel 16 says this, in part:

¹⁵ But you trusted in your beauty and played the whore because of your renown and lavished your whorings on any passerby; your beauty became his. ¹⁶ You took some of your garments and made for yourself colorful shrines, and on them played the whore. The like has never been, nor ever shall be. ¹⁷ You also took your beautiful jewels of my gold and of my silver, which I had given you, and made for yourself images of men, and with them played the whore (Ezek. 16:15–17).

Those are harsh words, to be sure. But they reflect the fact that when Israel started looking to other things for their security, satisfaction, and meaning in life, they were cheating on God. And the result was that they lived like all the nations around them, doing wicked things.

In the story of Israel, God is said to have divorced his people. In Isaiah 50:1, God says to the people of Israel,

Where is your mother’s certificate of divorce,
with which I sent her away?

In Hosea 2:2, God says that Israel is not his wife and he is not her husband. God says much the same thing in Jeremiah 3:6–8. God’s relationship with Israel was conditioned on their obedience. If they were faithless, they would be breaking covenant with God.

But even in the Old Testament, God promised that one day he would remarry Israel. In Isaiah 49, God said that though there had been a rift in their relationship, God had engraved his people on his hands. God said that people would come to Israel and ornament them like a bride (see Isa. 49:13–18). Isaiah 54:4–8 says this:

- 4 “Fear not, for you will not be ashamed;
be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced;
for you will forget the shame of your youth,
and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more.
- 5 For your Maker is your husband,
the LORD of hosts is his name;
and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,
the God of the whole earth he is called.
- 6 For the LORD has called you
like a wife deserted and grieved in spirit,
like a wife of youth when she is cast off,
says your God.
- 7 For a brief moment I deserted you,
but with great compassion I will gather you.
- 8 In overflowing anger for a moment
I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,”
says the LORD, your Redeemer.

And there are other passages that say similar things (Isa. 61:10; 62:1–5; Hos. 2:19–20). God promised to remarry a people.

Now, I have said that this story concerns Israel. And that is true. But Israel in the Bible seems to represent people at large. In other words, the story of Israel is basically the story of mankind. God made human beings for himself, but they were faithless, so God sent them away with a certificate of divorce. But God promised that he would make things right, and that he would have a relationship with people who had been faithless. So, this story isn’t really about some foreign nation. It’s about us, too.

And the next part of the story certainly concerns us. The good news is that the groom comes for his bride. And the Bible reveals that Jesus is that groom. He calls himself the bridegroom in the Gospels (Matt. 9:15; Mark 2:19; Luke 5:34), as does John the Baptist (John 3:29). And passages like Revelation 19 make it clear who is bride is. Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). Jesus came to search for his bride.

Jesus is the Son of God. The Son of God is eternal, knowing no beginning. He has always existed with the Father and the Spirit in a perfect union of love. God had no need to create, but he chose to. And God didn’t need to rescue sinners from sin. He had no need to remarry them. But he chose to. And that is amazing. He came to win back his bride because he loves them.

In many traditions, a groom had to pay a price for his bride, often giving money or a gift to her father. What price did it cost for Jesus to secure his bride? Here, as he is often called in

Revelation, Jesus is called the Lamb. He's called the Lamb because lambs were sacrificed in the place of sinners. The Israelites were commanded to offer animal sacrifices to atone for their sins. The idea is this: as sinners, they deserved to receive the death penalty, but God mercifully allowed for others to die in their place. The Israelites could go free as long as lambs died.

That is what Jesus does for us. We can live—and live forever—because Jesus died in our place when he was crucified. Jesus laid down his life for his people. The groom died for his bride.

Those who come to trust in Jesus, who put their lives in his hands, become his bride. Those who love Jesus are his bride. And those who love Jesus will obey him (John 14:15, 21, 23). But faith and repentance and obedience are all a gift. It is by grace that we are saved (Eph. 2:8–9; Tit. 3:5). But those who receive that gift put it into practice. We can't truly make ourselves acceptable to God. That's impossible. God cleans us up to make us a beautiful, pure bride. But we can in another sense make ourselves ready for Jesus by putting his words into practice. We can adorn ourselves with righteous deeds. Those deeds don't save us from condemnation. They are not the cause of our salvation. But they are a mark of our love for our groom, they are the fruit of salvation.

So, in this period of history, we are preparing for the groom to come. But when Jesus comes back to earth, he will judge the living and the dead, he will remove all evil from the world, he will make all things new, and he will consummate that marriage. Don't take that literally! This is a metaphor. But the idea is that when Jesus returns, he will finally marry his people, and they will celebrate forever. As I've said before, the plot of the Bible can be summarized this way: Kill the dragon, get the girl. When Jesus returns, he will slay the dragon, Satan, and all who are in league with him. And Jesus will get the girl, his bride.

We're told there will be a marriage supper, a feast. There are times when eternity with God is described as a feast. My favorite such passage is this one, in Isaiah 25:6–9:

- ⁶ On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,
of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.
- ⁷ And he will swallow up on this mountain
the covering that is cast over all peoples,
the veil that is spread over all nations.
- ⁸ He will swallow up death forever;
and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces,
and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth,

- for the Lord has spoken.
- ⁹ It will be said on that day,
“Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us.
This is the LORD; we have waited for him;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

Not only will there be a feast of the very best foods and wines, but God will also swallow up death. The greatest pleasures will be found with Jesus forever in a new creation, and the very worst, death, will be nowhere to be found.

Christians, look forward to this great day of celebration. When you feel down, depressed, beaten up by the world, when your life is anything but a feast, when you feel unloved and alone, remind yourself of this truth: Jesus, the groom, loves you, his bride. He loves you so much that he would be the Lamb, the one who sacrifices himself for you. If you have been called to this wedding, you have been blessed. Trust in Jesus. Prepare yourselves for that great wedding day by ornamenting yourself with righteous deeds. And worship no one or nothing else.

That last point is reflected in verse 10. John falls down at the angel’s feet to worship him. But the angel says, “You must not do that! Worship God.” Worship God—Father, Son, and Spirit—alone. Trust God alone for salvation, for hope, for identity, for meaning in this life. No matter how impressive anything else looks, don’t worship that thing or that person. Put your hopes not in politicians or pastors or athletes or scientists. Trust Jesus.

If you are not a Christian, I say this to you: Don’t you want to be part of a perfectly loving marriage? Don’t you want to celebrate forever, to be invited to the best feast there will ever be? Don’t you want to be led by someone who makes only righteous and true judgments? Don’t you want someone to bring about lasting peace and true justice? Don’t you want to love and be loved by someone who loves you so much that he would die for you? You can have all of this if you put your trust in Jesus. Do that today. If you have no idea what that means, please talk to me. But know that this isn’t my message. This isn’t something that any human made up. “These are the true words of God.”