

# “Blessed Are Those Who Are Invited”

## Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 26

*Texts: Revelation 19:1-10; Isaiah 61:1-11*

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**A**s we get closer to the end of the Book of Revelation, John begins to reveal more and more about the future. Although Revelation opens with John focusing upon the persecuted church’s struggle with the first century Roman empire—things which John says must soon take place—now at the end of this vision, John fast-forwards his reader to the end of time. This means that the Roman empire and its emperors serve as a symbolic picture of all of those empires which will arise throughout the course of the present evil age and which persecute the church of Jesus Christ. Beginning with the final two bowl judgments of Revelation 16, John focuses more intently on those events associated with the end of the age in the chapters which follow.

We are continuing our series on the Book of Revelation and we now turn our attention to Revelation 19 and John’s account of the wedding of the Lamb. While the harlot is committing spiritual adultery with the nations, the bride of Christ is preparing herself for her groom. Therefore, the bride of Christ stands in stark contrast to the harlot, whose beauty is a Satanic deception and whose destruction has been the subject of previous section, Revelation 16:17-18:24. But in order to fully understand the significance of the contrast John makes between the bride of Christ and the bride of the dragon (the harlot), we need to do a bit of brief review before turning to our text in Revelation 19.

Recall that at the end of Revelation chapter 16, John witnesses an angel pour out the seventh bowl of God’s wrath—the final act of the three great cycles of judgment depicted in the Book of Revelation. The seventh bowl judgment causes a great earthquake which splits the city of man into three parts. The great city (Babylon the Great, as John identifies it), is destroyed by the quake, along with all of the cities allied with it. Using apocalyptic symbolism, John informs us that this particular city sits upon seven hills and serves as the headquarters for a series of great kings who arise within. Again, the key to understanding John’s symbolic language is the Old Testament, viewed from the perspective of the coming of Jesus Christ and set against the backdrop of the historical context in which John writes, the Mediterranean world of the first century, then dominated by the military and economic might of the Roman empire.

More than likely, John’s first century reader—especially one who knew the Old Testament—would have immediately made the connection between the ancient city of Babylon and the city of Rome, which was then the current source for much of the persecution facing John’s readers. Indeed, throughout the Old Testament, the city of Babylon is the heart of a pagan empire. It is that horrible place of humiliation where Israel is taken in captivity. Babylon is also depicted throughout Israel’s prophets as the epitome of Gentile godlessness and the oppression of the people of God. But one day, the prophets tell us, Babylon will fall under the hand of God’s wrath. This, in turn, anticipates the fall of a great city depicted in Revelation 17-18.

Now identified by John in Revelation as the great prostitute and harlot, John describes the corrupting influence of the Babylon the Great in terms of a seductress, who has enticed the kings and nations of the earth into committing spiritual adultery with her, which is for idolatry. But as John has already told us, the harlot has also seduced a number of Christians, drawing them way from their bridegroom, Jesus Christ. Her allure is her superficial beauty, her great wealth and her power. But, as we have seen, all of these are Satanic deceptions which will fade in short order.

As John's vision unfolds, the gravity of the woman's crimes become more and more apparent. According to John, the harlot "holds a golden cup in her hand filled with abominable things." Furthermore, the harlot is depicted by John as riding upon the scarlet beast, symbolic of the unholy alliance forged between the woman and the beast. Indeed, the harlot gladly does the beast's bidding, even to the point of participating with the beast in the persecution of the church, which is why John describes her as "drunk on the blood of the saints." Using her powers of seduction with great effect, she furthers the beast's evil agenda so successfully that John describes her as sitting on many waters, indicating that her influence is spread throughout the world. In fact, in Revelation 17:15, John speaks of her as having seduced peoples, multitudes, nations and languages.

In Revelation 18, John moves on to describe the response of both heaven and earth to the news that God's judgment is going to come upon Babylon. Heaven resounds with praise, because God's judgments are just and he will repay this evil woman in such a way that her punishments clearly fit her crimes. The glittering and prosperous Babylon will become a desolate wasteland, home to nothing but demons and vultures. But it is at this point in his vision that John also hears a voice from heaven warning God's people one last time that Babylon's destruction is imminent and that now is the time for all of God's people to flee from the great city before it is too late.

But while heaven rejoices at the news of Babylon's destruction and even as God warns his people to flee from the arms of the harlot, three times in verses 4-19, John reports that an anguished cry of lament rises from the inhabitants of the earth, moved by the sight of the great city being consumed by flames. The kings of the earth, we are told, weep and mourn at her loss. Likewise, the merchants of the earth weep and mourn, as do the sailors and the stevedores who move the goods produced and traded by the city. Because they have all done the harlots' bidding, Babylon's destruction not only wipes out their own ill-gotten gains, but the fate of the great city is an eerie foreshadowing of the judgment soon to fall upon all those who have worshiped the beast and his image, and who have taken his mark on the back of the hand or the forehead so as to buy and sell. The flames which now consume Babylon will soon consume them! Thus even as they mourn her destruction, they are also terrified.

Therefore, Revelation chapter 18 comes to an end with a description of Babylon being crushed by a giant millstone. No longer will there be any sounds of laughter or music within the great city. No longer will there be the sounds of life or of commerce in her streets, retribution because the streets of the harlot city have run with the blood of the prophets and the saints. As the harlot has helped the beast shed the blood of the saints, so too, God will take all life from Babylon the Great. There will be no voices or sounds within her walls, only silence. Her fate is sealed, her doom is sure.

And so it is with all that we've learned about Babylon in mind, we now turn to the first 10 verses of Revelation 19, where John is given a vision of the bride of Jesus Christ, which is his church. While the great city Babylon has been committing spiritual adultery with the kings and nations, God has been preparing a bride for his Son. Indeed, with the destruction of Babylon now complete, the long-anticipated wedding is about to begin. Thus the account of the harlot which began in Revelation 16 with the seventh bowl of judgment, now comes to an end in a most unexpected way. The destruction of the harlot becomes the occasion of the marriage of the Lamb. And heaven resounds with the sounds of celebration.

Revelation 19 opens, as does the previous chapter, with the sound of rejoicing in heaven at the news of the destruction of Babylon the Great, who, for so long, has persecuted the suffering church upon the earth. But this time heaven rejoices not only because of the harlot's final destruction, but because the

long anticipated wedding day of the Lamb has now come. The Messiah and redeemer of God's people is ready to take his bride. In fact, it is important to notice that some five times in the first six verses of what follows, we hear "hallelujahs" coming from the company in heaven, which includes not only the angels, but from all the saints throughout all of redemptive history, who have died in Christ, believing God's promise to save sinners and longing for this great day to arrive.<sup>1</sup>

According verse 1, "*after this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting: 'Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.'* And again they shouted: '*Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever.*'" Recall that in Revelation 18:20, God speaks to the heavenly host, inviting them to begin the celebration: "*Rejoice over her, O heaven! Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets! God has judged her for the way she treated you.*" Having vindicated his people just as he promised he would, the hosts of heaven do indeed respond, rejoicing and singing the oft-repeated refrain "*Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments.*" God has now avenged the blood of all those who have suffered for righteousness sake at the hands of the harlot.

Notice that this is no small group rejoicing in heaven. John describes them as a great multitude singing God's praises. This is the same multitude described earlier in Revelation 7:9 as being so large that no one could begin to count them, meaning the number of the elect is not small. They come from every nation, tribe, people and language, meaning that God has his elect among all the nations. All of them have come out of the great tribulation, which is the entire period of time between the first advent and second coming of Jesus Christ. They either died trusting in Jesus Christ, or else they were put to death as martyrs for their confession that Jesus Christ is Lord and they refused to worship the beast and his image. These are the same people who, in Revelation 6:10, "*called out in a loud voice, 'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?'*" Although they have suffered greatly on earth, the time has now come for them to celebrate. God has judged the earth and avenged them!<sup>2</sup> Therefore, they cry out "Hallelujah!" "Hallelujah!" for the time has come!

Indeed, the sight of Babylon going up in smoke not only produces the shouts of Hallelujah from the multitude of saints in heaven, the heavenly court also joins in the great celebration. "*The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God, who was seated on the throne. And they cried: 'Amen, Hallelujah!'*" There are loud echoes here from Psalm 106:48: "*Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Let all the people say, 'Amen!' Praise the LORD.*" The Psalm recounts Israel praising YHWH for delivering them from their enemies who oppressed them, which is now the case with the destruction of Babylon. The elders and the living creatures not only shout "Hallelujahs" along with the redeemed saints, they also shout "Amen!" formally ratifying God's just judgment.<sup>3</sup>

But immediately after their "Amen!" another voice is heard, directing the multitude of redeemed saints and the heavenly court to worship the God who has delivered his people from the hands of all their

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<sup>1</sup> Poythress, The Returning King, 171.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 260-261.

<sup>3</sup> Beale, Revelation, 930.

enemies. Thus we read in verse 5, “*then a voice came from the throne, saying: ‘Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, both small and great!’*”

Not only is the destruction of the harlot a cause for celebration, the destruction of Babylon means that the consummation of all things is at hand. As we read in verses 6-7, “*then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: ‘Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.’*” These greatly intensified voices of praise are indicative of two major developments.

The first development is unfortunately obscured a bit here by the translation the “*Lord God Almighty reigns.*” John hears the great multitude shouting “Hallelujah!” with great intensity because something dramatic and climatic has happened—“The Lord God Almighty *has begun* to reign!” (an ingressive aorist, not a present tense for those of you who care about such things).<sup>4</sup> The point is that God has begun to reign over all because Babylon, finally, has been destroyed. This doesn’t mean that God has not ruled over all prior to this moment. Of course he did. But until this moment, God has ruled according to his long-suffering mercies, allowing evil to run its course, even allowing the dragon, the beast, the false prophet and the harlot to persecute his people. No longer. God’s wrath is now complete.

Indeed, John foresees the time when God destroys the godless harlot who so arrogantly assumed divine prerogatives and privileges unto herself, persecuting the church. Hence his eternal rule enters its final phase—that in which there are no more enemies, for the Lord God Almighty has now destroyed and conquered them all. That which was foretold in Revelation 11:15 in connection with the seventh trumpet judgment is now a glorious reality: “*The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.’*” The kingdom which came in Jesus Christ as recorded in the gospels, has now been consummated. The Lord God Almighty has begun to reign!

But there is a second development here which prompts the magnitude of the celebration as well. According to John, *for the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.* As one writer puts it so well, “with the [coming of the] kingdom comes the wedding.”<sup>5</sup> Not only has the bride made herself ready, but “*fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.*” (*Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.*)” There are several important points here we must consider as well.

As we read in verse 8, the bride has made herself ready, in part, because of her own righteous acts. These righteous acts are depicted as being like fine linen, bright and clean. But the wedding garments are also said to be given to the bride by her groom before the wedding.

Now, let us be clear here. John is not teaching a doctrine of salvation by good works. In fact, some seven times we read in Revelation of the testimony of Jesus, which is a reference to God’s people (the church) bearing witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ in both word and deed throughout the entire time between the first and second comings of Jesus Christ. In other words, throughout this evil age, Christ’s bride prepares herself for her marriage to the Lamb, by testifying to the unbelieving world around her of

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<sup>4</sup> Beale, Revelation, 931.

<sup>5</sup> Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 263.

the truth of the gospel, and matching that profession with good deeds—what we might speak of in another context as giving evidence of one’s sanctification.<sup>6</sup>

Paul for example, speaks of this in a passage most of you know from memory: Ephesians 2:8-10: *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”* So not only are we saved by grace through faith and not by works, but to be saved by grace through faith apart from works is to be God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works! John not only speaks of the bride preparing herself, but he also tells us that she is also given her fine garments by her groom.

Therefore, we can say with great confidence that John is indicating that the bride prepares herself for the wedding through the good works that God has called and equipped her to do. But there is more to this, especially given the context.

One way in which the bride prepares herself for the wedding by remaining faithful to her bridegroom and resisting the seductive ways of the harlot. In the previous chapter, John has reminded God’s people, *“Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues.”* Therefore, to resist the world (including facing the persecution which may come at the hands of the beast—the state), and to reject the money, power and glamour of the harlot, is to receive the white robe. This means that the white robe is outward sign not only of the bride’s faithfulness to her bridegroom, it is also her wedding present from Christ.

There is one more thing certainly worth noting. In Isaiah chapters 61-62, the prophet speaks of God giving to his people, Israel, fine wedding garments, which are said to be “garments of righteousness.” In Isaiah 61:10, our Old Testament Lesson we read the declaration of the prophet: *“I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.”* This clearly points to the deity of Christ. Throughout the Old Testament, YHWH is said to be Israel’s husband. In Hosea 2:20, YHWH declares to Israel: *“I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the LORD.”* Christ now assumes the role of the Israel’s husband, indicative not only of his deity but his divine authority and prerogatives.

As many have noted, the righteousness spoken of by Isaiah points ahead to a time when God will vindicate himself, when he declares his people to be righteous (justification) and then makes them such (sanctification). This points us forward to the messianic age and the coming of Jesus Christ, who not only provides his people with a perfect righteousness—his own—but who also transforms justified sinners into a radiant, spotless church, something made plain by Paul in Ephesians 5:25: *“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.”* This is exactly what we see described by John here in Revelation 19, only from the perspective apocalyptic prophecy.

When God gives garments of righteousness to his bride, who is also preparing herself to wear them, he vindicates his people for their faithfulness to Christ, despite the suffering they endure and the persecution

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<sup>6</sup> Beale, Revelation, 934-935.

that they face. But God also vindicates himself and his own righteous ways in dealing with his creatures. The bride has been prepared for the wedding to his Son, all of God's enemies are all destroyed, and all his judgments have been demonstrated to be perfectly just.<sup>7</sup> God's decision to save sinners through the person of his Son, to justify the ungodly, and then to sanctify them, has been vindicated before the watching world. God's judgments upon his enemies are just. So is his plan of salvation.

With the time for the wedding now at hand, we read in verse 9, that *"then the angel said to [John], 'Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!' And he added, 'These are the true words of God.'"* With this we come to the fourth benediction in Revelation ("Blessed are"). The final culmination of redemptive history is often depicted in terms of a great feast, or messianic celebration. In Isaiah 25:6-9, the prophet speaks of it this way: *"On this mountain 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. The LORD has spoken. 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.'" The mountain to which Isaiah is referring is the heavenly Zion, the Mount of Gathering, where Jesus stands among his people. The feast to which Isaiah is referring is the great marriage supper of the Lamb now described by John in this vision!*

In Matthew 22:1-14 and Luke 14:15-22, Jesus told a parable about a great wedding banquet, in which a great king invites a number of important guests to the wedding of his son, but who then turn down the king's invitation because they are too busy to attend. Here in John's vision, the people in Jesus' parable who refuse to come to the wedding would be those who would rather serve the beast and worship his image, or those who fail to flee from the harlot's arms when warned, because they are too deeply involved in her idolatry.

In both Matthew and Luke's account, the king's judgment falls on all those who reject his gracious invitation. And since his invited guests (Israel) will not come, we read that the king *"said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.' So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests."* In fact, Jesus goes on to speak of how the king provided his guests with the appropriate wedding garments and that any who attempt to crash the party without the right clothing are to be destroyed.

John now speaks of the blessing of receiving an invitation from God himself to attend the wedding of his Son. But this invitation is not that of a guest, but as a bride! Thus in Revelation 19:7-8, the glorious messianic wedding feast for which Israel's prophets had longed, and of which Jesus spoke in his parable, has now become a reality. Indeed, upon learning of the glories of what lies ahead for the people of God, John instinctively responds: *"At this I fell at [the angel's] feet to worship him. But he said to me, 'Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.'"*

Moved by what he has just seen, John instinctively seeks to worship the angel who has brought such glorious news. But he must not worship the messenger, he must worship God! For blessed are all those

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<sup>7</sup> Beale, Revelation, 941-942.

who hold to the testimony of Jesus in the face of persecution and seduction, for they are now invited to the marriage supper of Christ the Lamb.

By holding fast to the message of what God has done for sinners in the person of Jesus Christ, we are even now preparing ourselves to receive the glorious gift Jesus Christ himself will give us, the wedding garment of fine linen, bright and clean. For our righteous deeds are wrought by Christ himself, as we testify to a dying world of the love and grace of Jesus Christ, while we resist the beast in our proclamation, “Jesus Christ alone is Lord,” and as we flee the harlot and her seductive ways.

To all of you who are trusting in Jesus Christ through faith alone, you have received your invitation to the marriage supper of Christ the Lamb. With the true beauty of our wedding garment before us, the fine linen of Christ’s perfect righteousness, white and clean, we can see the apparent beauty of the harlot for what it truly is—a false and fading glory, destined to perish in the flames of God’s fury.

Beloved, in Jesus Christ, God has invited us to that glorious feast which celebrates the destruction of his enemies and the final vindication of his grace and his judgments. There will be the finest of fare, aged wine, the best of meats. There is no more death, despair, pain or suffering. But it is also the appointed time for the glorious wedding of the king’s son.

And we are invited to this wedding, but not merely as guests to watch the grand pageant. Beloved, we are invited to become Christ’s own glorious bride: “*radiant, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.*”

Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb! Amen.