

Headline: God Wins!!

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

8th in a nine-part series

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Revelation 19:6-16 (NIV)

⁶Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunder peals, crying out,

“Hallelujah!

For the Lord our God
the Almighty reigns.

⁷Let us rejoice and exult
and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready;

⁸to her it has been granted to be clothed
with fine linen, bright and pure”—
for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.”

⁹And 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 true words of God.” ¹⁰Then 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 comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”

¹¹I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. ¹²His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself.

¹³He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. ¹⁴The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean.

¹⁵Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. “He will rule them with an iron scepter.” He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.

¹⁶On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

Revelation 20:11–15 (NIV)

¹¹Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. ¹²And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.

¹³The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. ¹⁴Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. ¹⁵Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

Hear this: God's victory is our salvation!

A brief look back

John's visions in Revelation tell the story of a cosmic struggle between the Lamb and those who oppose the Lamb. In the visions of chapters 6-11, this story plays out as a struggle between the heavens and the earth. As devastation rains down on the earth's inhabitants, the question is whether any will repent and give glory to God. Some do. John sees martyred believers hiding under the altar of God. Later, John hears and sees a great multitude of faithful from every nation. Yet many (most?) resist; they do “not repent of the works of their hands or give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood” (9:20). Finally, God sends two witnesses who testify to God. Though they are killed, their resurrection causes, at last, many people to give glory to God.

After another scene of triumphant and joyous worship, John's visions take a turn. The cosmic conflict is now cast as a struggle between Satan and God – and, yes, you can guess how this ends.

Beginning in chapter 12, Satan is seen as a great red dragon. After failing to devour Christ, who is depicted as the child of a heavenly woman, Satan is defeated by the forces of Gabriel, the archangel, and is cast down to the earth, where Satan is penned in, much like a caged animal. Satan is able to roam back and forth across the planet doing great harm. He forms his own little demonic trinity: Satan, a beast from the sea, and a beast from the land. They wage war on the followers of the Lamb, getting drunk on the blood of the saints. As John's visions proceed, it soon becomes clear that the Roman Empire, "Babylon"¹ as it is called in the visions, is the latest in a long line of Satan's minions. Chapter 18 describes the fall of Babylon, after which all the heavens sing "Hallelujah!"² to open chapter 19.

In chapter 19, John again hears the sound of all creation worshipping God. And he hears the announcement that the time for the marriage supper of the Lamb has come at last. Before racing on to the scene of the final battle which concludes chapter 19, we need to reflect on this staggering image of the Lamb and his bride.

The bride and groom

Marriage as a metaphor for God's relationship with his people is one of the most enduring and profound of all biblical images. The power of the metaphor is grounded in the significance of covenant. The marriage of a man and a woman is a covenant, instituted by God, to which both are expected to remain faithful. The relationship between God and his people is lived out in a covenant – to which both are expected to remain faithful. Thus, just as adultery is forbidden in a marriage, even making the Top Ten list, the prophet Hosea³ uses adultery to describe Israel's relentless chasing after other gods (Hosea 2). But Hosea also describes God's determination to woo his bride anew so that "she shall respond as in the days of her youth" (Hosea 2:15).

In the New Testament, Jesus is repeatedly referred to as the bridegroom. John the Baptist is a friend of the groom (John 3:22-30). When Jesus is asked by the Pharisees why his disciples don't fast, he tells them that the disciples are wedding guests who won't fast while they are with the groom (Mark 2:18-22). Numerous parables liken Jesus' ministry and the coming kingdom of God to a wedding feast.

All this prepares us for the images in John's vision as we near the end of the story. The Lamb, Christ, is almost ready for his marriage to his bride, the Church. Jesus' second coming will be the consummation of this marriage. An angel then arrives, bearing a message of salvation, the third of the book's seven beatitudes: "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb," recalling Jesus' parable of a wedding feast that focuses on invitations rejected and accepted (Matthew 22:1-14). John is so overcome by all this, that he falls on the ground to worship the angel. He is, of course, scolded by the angel, for we are to worship only God.

It is important to grasp that the Lamb and his bride are married not only in the future, but in the present. We often make the mistake of thinking of time as only linear. But we live post-Einstein. According to his theories, which have been borne out, time passes more slowly for an astronaut circling the earth at high speed than it does for us on the ground. The astronaut's "after" is my "before." If the astronaut's "before" and my "before" aren't the same, why should I assume that "before" and "after" have any fixed meaning with God?

We struggle to make sense of the New Testament's perspective that *God's kingdom has come already, but not yet*. We struggle to grasp that the people of God are not just waiting to be the bride, but are *already* the bride. In the glorious images of Revelation 21, God comes to dwell with his people. And yet God dwells already with his people. We are God's temple. The Holy Spirit is God dwelling amongst us.

¹600 years before Jesus, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and burned down the temple.

²Revelation 19 is the only place in the NT where "Hallelujah" appears. It is an Old Testament phrase meaning "praise the Lord!" Handel's Hallelujah Chorus in *Messiah* is taken from Revelation 19:6 and 11:15.

³The book of Hosea has some of the most remarkable biblical imagery weaving together the marriage covenant with the covenant between God and his people.

All this takes a massive feat of imagination, and Revelation is written for the imagination. John's visions are meant to help us imagine the truth of a reality larger than we see and touch in our daily lives.

The battle that isn't

From the marriage scene we move on to Jesus' victory over the beast and all those who do his bidding (19:19). But to our surprise, there is no imagining of the great battle. Instead, we see Jesus riding out to do battle and then we see the aftermath. Perhaps this is because when Jesus decides to mount his white horse, in that very moment he has won. Who could ever hope to win a fight against the Lamb? The end of the beast from the land and the beast from the sea are assured before the fight even begins. How could it be any other way, short of God forsaking both his promises and his creation? But if we know anything at all about God, it is that God is faithful. God is the great promise-maker and the great promise-keeper, even if that means that his only begotten son will die on a cross for the sake of those whom God loves.

After victory – God's judgment (Revelation 20)⁴

After Jesus' victory, an angel swoops out of the heavens and imprisons the dragon (Satan), where he will stay locked up for a thousand years.⁵ In a shocking move, at least to me, the dragon is then released. Why? I'd like to think that this bit of story is meant to speak to us about a God who will give even the dragon one more chance to repent and return to God. Perhaps I'm right. Perhaps not.

That is how it is in much of this strange book of visions; it isn't that hard to see the big picture, but many of the smaller bits call for much interpretational humility. For example, what are we to make of the thousand year reign of Christ in this chapter. Certainly, much has been made of this "millennium" over the centuries. Probably too much, as this is the only place in the Bible that this "millennium" is mentioned. It could mean many things. Again, Revelation leaves us with many small "perhaps."

But if we get out of the details, the story becomes clear. God wins. Satan loses. Jesus reigns. And at the very end of all this, just before the arrival of the "new heaven and new earth" (Rev. 21:1), all the dead are resurrected. On this point, there is much support in the New Testament. Just as Jesus was raised, so shall we all be raised. We affirm this week in the Apostles' Creed and its promise of the "resurrection of the body."

It is important to grasp that across the entire Bible, Old Testament and New, that this resurrection is of all people, those who have come to God and those who have not. *All* people.

And then all people, now resurrected, stand to be judged, each "according to what they had done" (20:13). All this is recorded in a book, what we might call the book of merit. I don't know about you, but many of my entries in this book deserve God's condemnation.

Blessedly, however, there is a second book, the "book of life" (20:12). And all those whose names are found in that book go on to eternity with God and one another in the "new heaven and new earth." Of course, in whom is there life? In the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Jesus is, as he said, the "resurrection and the life" (John 11:25) We are made right with God by trusting in Jesus, in his rescue of us. This is the New Testament through and through. Those whose names are written in the book of life are marked by their faith in Christ.

As Revelation 20 ends, there is one question that hangs in the air every time we come to this place in my classes: *But what about those who have not come to faith in Christ by the time of the judgment?*

⁴ It would be a good idea to read Revelation 20 before going on.

⁵ A thousand years, here and elsewhere in the Bible, is not a precise unit of measurement, but is meant to convey a very long time, about as long as could be imagined.

One answer might be that they are tossed into that lake of fire in Rev. 20:15, where I presume they would be burned up, annihilated, for that is what fire does. Even “death” was tossed into that fire (20:14), signifying that death shall be no more.

Or perhaps they head for the “outer darkness” of Matthew 8:12. For me, that evokes the chaos and desolation of an existence without God, which I hesitate to even call “life.” Something like the eternal grayness imagined by C.S. Lewis.

Or perhaps, it is a place where those who deny God spend eternity suffering in a fire that burns but doesn’t consume so that “the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever” and their torment is “in the presence of the holy angels and I the presence of the Lamb” (see Rev. 14:9-11).⁶ In the fourth century, Augustine went so far as to say that God uses his creative power to ensure that there is always fresh flesh for burning. As you might guess, I find it hard to picture Jesus condoning such torment even of the very worst among those who deny him.

You can see the problem. It really isn’t surprising that there is a book outlining four quite different views of hell by knowledgeable, well-meaning, and devoted Christians.⁷ I’m guessing there are quite a few such books. The truth is that the Bible just doesn’t give us all the answers we seek – on this topic and many others.

Over the years, there have been two thoughts around this topic that have really stayed with me. The first is from Clark Pinnock, an evangelical biblical scholar who has gotten into some hot water with his more conservative colleagues on this topic. Pinnock simply pointed out that (1) the phrase in Scripture is “eternal punishment,” not “eternal punishing,” and (2) fire would consume and destroy even resurrected bodies, which are still flesh and bone. Pinnock found himself led by Scripture to the belief that those who, in the end, choose against God will simply cease to exist, i.e., they will annihilated. But, you might say, aren’t our souls immortal? Though this tends to be how Christians understand things, it really isn’t a biblical concept. At least, I’ve never been able to find it in Scripture.⁸ We are not promised eternal life outside of our life with God.

N. T. Wright asks us to consider this. We are made in the image of God. Sadly, too many peoples’ lives are devoted to pursuits and purposes that chip away at it, much like a statue that is allowed to accumulate rust and slowly decay. Until we are reconciled to God, this image of God in us all deteriorates and dulls. Indeed some people commit such horrors that we wonder if there is anything of God left in them. What happens if a person never comes to faith in Christ in this life or, possibly, even the next? Would not the image of God in them finally be extinguished. And, if so, what remains of their humanity. Of all God’s creatures, only we humans are made in his image. What if that image is gone? Could we even be considered human? Would we not be just another beast? Immortal perhaps, but no longer “Scott,” no longer a person, no longer human.

Like so many of the questions that come to us as we make our way through the Revelation of John, our answers must always be prefaced with a *perhaps*.

But there is no *perhaps* when it comes to next week’s conclusion to this series. With the arrival of “the new heaven and new earth,” the fulfillment and consummation of all God’s promises are unleashed in a fresh outpouring of God’s creative energy and grace.

⁶I’ll simply note here that you don’t have to spend much time in Revelation to realize it would be absurd to hold that all the images in this apocalyptic writing are “photographic” depictions of actual events in the past, present, or future. Will we one day live in a city made of pure gold? And, if so, how could it be clear as glass? (Rev. 21:18). To treat the glories of Revelation in that way is to abuse this God-breathed writing and to miss the point entirely!

⁷*Four Views of Hell*, ed. William Crockett, Zondervan, 1996.

⁸It is fascinating how many such beliefs there. We assume that they are in the Bible, but have actually come from elsewhere and we’ve then simply strived to make them fit. Frankly, many of these imported ideas come from Plato.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The marriage supper of the Lamb and his bride is one of the most powerful images in Revelation. You might begin by talking about the marriage covenant and why it is so often used in the Bible to describe the relationship between God and his people. What does the word “covenant” describe? How would you summarize our covenant with God? What are our responsibilities? What are God’s? How has God been faithful to the covenant? How have you?
2. Do you have any thoughts on why the dragon/Satan was locked up only to be paroled? It is ok to use imagination and to speculate. The book is meant to stimulate you.
3. In Revelation all the dead are resurrected, both “great and small.” And this resurrection is bodily. Just as Jesus was raised, Paul writes, so shall we all be raised (see 1 Corinthians 15). What does the promise of bodily resurrection really mean to you now? God created a physical world and pronounced it good. God created us in God’s image. The “life after life-after-death” that God promises each of us is a gloriously transformed, but still physical, life. How might this change our view of the present world? Of our own bodies? Of our responsibilities in this world? There are many people who want to convince us that what really matters in life is the spiritual not the physical. What does this promise of bodily resurrection say to them?
4. Judgment seems ominous and even frightening and in some ways it should. How many of us really want to stand to account before God for all that we have done and thought about doing? Yet, it is Jesus who is our judge and Jesus who is our advocate; indeed, Jesus stands in our place before the bench. You might talk about your own understanding of God’s judgment. How would you help someone else to understand what it means to have your name written in the book of life?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Hosea 2 How would you summarize the messages that God is trying to send regarding his marriage covenant with his people? Why send it in this way?</p>	<p>Tuesday, Psalm 45 This psalm is one of two wedding songs in the Bible. Who do you think is the groom here? Who is the bride? What are the parallels to Revelation 19?</p>
<p>Wednesday, Revelation 19 Notice that there is not a description of the climactic battle. Why do you think it is missing? Might it be because the battle isn’t really climactic, but anti-climactic?</p>	<p>Thursday, Revelation 20 The chapter has received a lot of attention over the millennia! Why do you think that Satan, the dragon, is paroled? Might God yet be hoping that Satan repents? In the judgment scene, who are judged? How do you square this image of people being “judged according to their works” with the NT claim that we are saved by grace and grace alone?</p>
<p>Friday, Philippians 2:5-11 In v. 10, “in heaven, on earth, and under the earth” describes the entirety of all that God made. There seems to be no one, anywhere, who does not acknowledge and embrace that Jesus is Lord.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

Scott Engle’s Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands in its own.
This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.
On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check
www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying the Gospel of John
Meet from 11:45 to 1:00 in room 127 on Tuesdays.

Monday Evening Class – now studying Revelation
Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall on Monday evenings.

Scott’s 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.
The class is usually led by Dr. Scott Engle and is organized into series.

Scott’s Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org.
Just go to “worship” and then “sermons.” You’ll find the study with
each week’s recorded sermon.

There is also an archive of nearly 500 studies at www.scottengle.org
They are posted as easily downloadable pdf files. Your browser can search the
listing for studies on specific books of the Bible or Scripture passages. They are
suitable for individual study and for biblically-oriented small group discussions.
You will also be able to join the Yahoo group (sa_studies) so you can get the Bible
studies e-mailed to you each week.

Sermon Notes
