

Eat or Be Eaten

Genesis 14:17-20 | Psalm 128 | Revelation 19:6-21 | John 2:1-11

REVELATION 19:6-21

⁶ Then 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. 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 to 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. 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 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 comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.' ¹¹ Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. ¹² His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself. ¹³ He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God. ¹⁴ And the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. ¹⁵ From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. ¹⁶ On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, 'King of kings and Lord of lords'. ¹⁷ Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly in mid-heaven, 'Come, gather for the great supper of God, ¹⁸ to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of the mighty, the flesh of horses and their riders—flesh of all, both free and slave, both small and great.' ¹⁹ Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against the rider on the horse and against his army. ²⁰ And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who had performed in its presence the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulphur. ²¹ And the rest were killed by the sword of the rider on the horse, the sword that came from his mouth; and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.

INTRODUCTION

"Due to the pandemic." I'm tired of these words. I'm sure you are too. They are words I see everywhere now, usually in cancellation notices of events I want to attend or watch. "Due to the pandemic," were the words I saw this last week announcing the cancellation of several inauguration events in Washington D.C. Inaugurations have an interesting history—from the parade that met George Washington in New York City in 1798, to the first Inaugural Luncheon with congressional leaders in the Capitol building in 1897 for President McKinley, to the first inaugural ball, hosted by Dolly Madison in 1809. And these rituals make sense. The opponent has been defeated. The transition of power has been completed. And a new era begins—it only makes sense to celebrate. But, "due to the pandemic," the celebratory lunch had to be cancelled, and the inaugural ball went virtual. As we take a look at the reading from Revelation, we discover a celebration that isn't going to be cancelled. In fact, we find two celebrations, two parties, two *very different* parties. And this picture begs the question: Which do you want to attend? Let's take a closer look.

1. THE WEDDING FEAST OF THE LAMB

With the first verse of the Revelation reading, we find ourselves joining John in the midst of an imagery-laden apocalyptic vision. He had just witnessed the fall of Babylon in the previous chapter—not the historic empire, but the figurative representation of the adversaries of God—who will be defeated in the last judgement of God, the great and mighty day of the Lord, the final battle between God and forces of evil. And with Babylon having been defeated, we read of the crowds hailing the arrival of the victor: *“a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunder-peals, crying out, ‘Hallelujah! (which means “Praise God”), for the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.”*¹ The text continues: *“Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory.”*² It's not unlike a trumpet fanfare announcing the new President. But that fanfare doesn't even come close to what this will be—when the matchless glory of God is revealed to the whole world and we cannot but help recognize that he reigns. Hallelujah, indeed.

Interestingly, this imagery is not merely the announcement of the victory, but the arrival of the victor as a bridegroom. *“For the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure.”*³ The victor is Christ Jesus, but depicted here as a Lamb. This is a reference back to chapter 5 (that we heard last week) and the Lamb who was slain, whose sacrifice of blood atones for his people, as well as the figure of the Lamb throughout the Scriptures.⁴ He is *“the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”*⁵ And the image here is one of celebration. His victory in death unites him to his bride—the people of God—and the wedding feast begins, a feast anticipated in the wedding at Cana, a feast anticipated in our Eucharistic meal.

Notice what the text then says about the bride: *“His bride has made herself ready; to 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.”*⁶ This bride has made herself ready and so has been granted fine, pure linen. The linen is *“the righteous deeds of the saints”* here in verse 8, which seems to be further defined as holding *“the testimony of Jesus”* in verse 10—a familiar image throughout the book of Revelation.⁷ Now, you may have noticed a tension in this sentiment. The bride—the Church—makes herself ready, and yet she is given her garment.⁸ In other words, the righteous deeds are both the necessary requirement of the bride in order to be worthy of marriage, and also the resulting gift in being married. I would suggest this is even built into the primary metaphor itself. As anyone who is married will tell you: A wedding feast is the celebration of a marriage, a completed act—and yet a marriage is so much more than a wedding. The wedding is just the start of a marriage. In this moment, the bride has been made ready—given her pure linen garment by God, a garment made pure by the blood of the slain Lamb—and she now wears it to the feast, to the wedding supper.

¹ Rev 19:6.

² Rev 19:6. I was helped in thinking through my exegesis of this section by G.K. Beale and David H. Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 403-404.

³ Rev 19:7. There is an important allusion here to Psa 118:22-24 and the vindication of Christ Jesus as the ‘stone that the builders rejected’ and which has become the ‘cornerstone.’ See Matt 21:42.

⁴ Rev 5:6, 12.

⁵ John 1:29.

⁶ Rev 19:7-8.

⁷ See Rev 1:2, 9; 6:9; 11:7; 12:11, 17; 20:4.

⁸ See Rev 3:5-6, 18; 6:11; 7:13-14.

2. THE JUDGEMENT FEAST OF THE ADVERSARIES

But, as the passage continues with verse 11, we see this only one of the two feasts depicted in this vision. The imagery shifts. The central figure becomes the rider on the white horse—also a picture of Jesus Christ. He is no longer the bridegroom or the Lamb, but the fierce warrior who vanquishes the enemies of God. And the armies of heaven, almost certainly including his faithful followers, his bride—also wearing fine white linen—do battle at his side.⁹ The wrath of God is unleashed through the rider—the King of Kings and Lord of Lords—as heaven delivers judgement against the adversaries of God.¹⁰ And an angelic voice calls from the sun: *“Come, gather for the great supper of God!”*¹¹ Only this not the wedding feast of the Lamb, but the judgement feast of the damned. The passage ends with the graphic detail of this judgement: *“And the rest were killed by the sword of the rider on the horse, the sword that came from his mouth; and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.”*¹²

Make no mistake, this is the end for those who oppose God, who deceive, who have given themselves to idolatry. And it is meant to be a disturbing, horrific picture of gruesome judgement. It is the other side of the coin. There really are just the two options on that great and final day. There is the bride, who has made herself ready, clothed in pure linen, and celebrating the marriage feast of her union with Christ Jesus, a union won by his sacrifice on a cross. And there are the kings and prophets and people of the earth who oppose God, who are not humbled before the King of Kings, who become food for the birds. Celebrate the wedding feast of the Lamb as the bride or become the feast of those who vanquish God’s enemies. Eat or be eaten.

3. WHERE SHALL WE DINE?

These two pictures—these two feasts—raise an important question for us. Are we, the bride of Christ, making ourselves ready? Are we living in a way that celebrates not only the grace of God in making us his bride, in bestowing upon us the gift of white garments, but doing righteous deeds and heeding his word? It’s an essential question. I know to which feast I want to be invited. So, how will I prepare myself?

Well, verse 10 certainly commends heeding the testimony of Jesus. Grammatically, this can be either the subjective or objective genitive—which is a fancy way of saying it can be either the words from Jesus that we must heed, or it could be the words about Jesus that we must proclaim. The reference to prophetic utterance in the Spirit in the same verse, the reference to Christ as the Word of God just a few verses later, and the reference to the sword coming from Jesus’s mouth in the last verse, all affirm the importance of this.¹³ Our preparation to be the bride of Christ and our garments as the bride of Christ are the righteous deeds of adhering to *and* proclaiming the Word of God in Christ Jesus. We are to be a witness in deed and word of the marvellous grace of Jesus Christ.

⁹ See the parallel reference in Rev 17:14. Likewise, in Revelation, it is the saints who tend to wear white linen. See Rev 3:4-5, 18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13-14. Though, the angelic host will certainly be a part of Christ’s armies. See Matt 13:40-42, 16:27, 24:30-31, 25:31-32; Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26; 2 Thess 1:7; Jude 14-15.

¹⁰ See especially Rev 19:11-16. See Dan 4:37 for the reference to the title *King of Kings and Lord of Lords*.

¹¹ Rev 19:17.

¹² Rev 19:21.

¹³ See Rev 19:10, 13, and 21.

I think there is a second important application in this passage—and it's where the passage began. Praise Yahweh. Hallelujah. The sound of victory that gives way to the sound of celebration is the sound of everlasting worship. We heard similar words last week in Revelation 5. And through our recent studies in Ezra, I've been appreciating all the more just how central worship is to our identity as Christians—right worship—in acts of worship and how we live. May we truly be those who, in our songs and celebrations as well as our lives, truly rejoice and exult and give him the glory. Or as the verses just prior to ours indicate, may we be those who proclaim: *"Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power to our God."*¹⁴

CONCLUSION

As I begin to draw this to a close, I want us to go back and consider one final aspect of inaugurations: the oath of office. It's not unlike a wedding vow. The oath that American presidents take is specified in Article 2, Section 1, of the US Constitution, a 1787 document establishing the basis of law in the United States.¹⁵ It's 35 words. The declaration of these 35 words is really the only requirement of an inauguration. Interestingly, however, every President since at least 1933, and most before, have added four additional words to the Constitutional oath: "So help me, God." It's a good model for us. It recognizes that we rely on help. And while we are called to be the perfect, spotless bride, made ready through righteous deeds and heeding the Word of the Lord, we are only able to do so with help. This is the nature of grace—undeserved help in our time of need. And it will be a glorious day, an unparalleled celebration of union. Let us be ready. *So, help us, God.*

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, we thank you for saving us, for making us your bride and clothing us in righteousness. May we be prepared for that day. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

¹⁴ Rev 19:1.

¹⁵ See the *Constitution of the United States of America*, Article II, Section 1, Clause 8. "I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States."