

May 14, 2000
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**FOLLOWING CHRIST IN A FRIGHTENING WORLD:
THE BRIDE OF CHRIST
*Revelation 19:4-10***

Two weeks ago I missed worship because I was with the men on their retreat. When I returned, I'll bet I heard five different reports about the same aspect of the Sunday service. Pastor Stuart alluded to it last week. Apparently, he was so moved by the Bell Choir's rendition of Handel's *Hallelujah Chorus* that he decided everyone should join in on an impromptu *Messiah* sing along. The only problem was, Stuart apparently forgot that there's more to the Hallelujah Chorus than just "hallelujah." From what I understand, there was a considerable amount of ad-libbing and scat singing. In fact, it sounded like Chapel Hill church had broken out in singing in tongues.

Well, this morning we come to the real thing. This great text is Handel's inspiration for his Hallelujah chorus. Pay close attention, why don't you--especially you, Stuart, and you'll learn the rest of the words.

Do you know what "hallelujah" means? It means "You praise God." Actually, literally it means "You praise Yahweh." Yahweh was the sacred name that God revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai. It was considered so sacred that no Jew would ever pronounce the name, "Yahweh." When they come to that name in the Hebrew text, they substitute "Adonai" which means "lord." "Hallelu" means you praise and "ya" is the nickname for Yahweh. Hallelujah--You praise God. Did you know you were saying the sacred name of God every time you used that word?

"Hallelujah" appears throughout the Bible. It appears most frequently in what book? The Psalms. And it appears most frequently in what Psalms? The "Hallel" Psalms, 113-118. These "you praise" psalms were sung at every celebration of the Passover. Psalms 113-114 were sung before the meal and Psalms 115-118 were sung after the meal. Do you remember in Mark's gospel when it says that after the Last Supper, they sang a hymn

and then went out to the Mount of Olives? Well, that hymn would have been one of the Hallel Psalms. Why were these Psalms sung at Passover? Because they are Psalms that celebrate God's deliverance of his people from horrible captivity in Egypt.

Now...let's move to this morning's text. Hallelujah is frequently used in the Book of Revelation, right? With all the angels singing and the elders singing and the beasts singing around the throne of heaven, it is a word we hear frequently, right? Wrong. Did you know that right here, in Revelation 19:1-10, are the only four times this word is used in the entire book! Only four times. Now why, in a book that is FILLED with the worship of God, does the Holy Spirit reserve the most famous praise word--- hallelujah --- for this one section of the book?

Think about it for a moment. The Hallel Psalms were sung to celebrate the Passover, God's deliverance from the seemingly indestructible enemy of his people, Egypt. What have we just finished reading about in Revelation 17-18? (I know it's been a while ...but think back.) The fall of the Harlot of Babylon. Those two chapters are devoted to telling how this great Harlot--which represented the government of Rome at that time...and continues to represent any and all governments that align themselves against God---how this great Harlot had been destroyed. Now if you had been one of John's readers, you would have thought this was a fairy tale. Rome was so powerful, no one would have believed that she would be ravaged and destroyed.

Why do we sing "Hallelujah" at this point in the text? Because God has delivered! We have been expecting it. We have been hoping for it. The text has promised that God would make all things right and would save his people. But now it has come. God has delivered just as he promised! And a Halleljuah chorus like has never been heard before... perhaps even stronger than the one you sang two weeks ago...a chorus so powerful that John has to describe it like the roar of rushing waters and pealing thunder. "Hallelujah. For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!"

But there's another reason to sing "hallelujah." It is a time of deliverance, true. But there's another reason. What is it? A new feast. This time, it is not the Passover for which they are singing. What kind of feast are they celebrating! A wedding feast. The

wedding feast of the Lamb. Who is the Lamb? Christ. That is the image this book uses to describe the resurrected and reigning Jesus. And who is his bride? We are! His followers. Those of us who call ourselves Christians.

Is this the first time we've heard this imagery of wedding to describe our relationship with Jesus? Of course not. Jesus spoke of it specifically in Matthew 22: "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come."

And the apostle Paul used the same imagery. In Ephesians Paul called Christ the bridegroom and his church, the bride. In II Corinthians 11:2 he says, "For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin."

If we are followers of Christ, we are engaged to be married to the Lamb. Now these days, engagement doesn't mean much. You get engaged...you break the engagement. You get engaged...you break the engagement. In fact, many are opting to just live together for a while...kind of a "test drive" before they buy.

But in Jesus' time...in John's time...engagement meant something much more. (I am obliged to Darrell Johnson for this material.) There were three stages to getting married: engagement (or, more accurately, betrothal), preparation for the wedding and the wedding supper itself. In the betrothal, the groom and best man would travel to the prospective bride's house. He would declare his intentions and strike a deal with the father. He would pay a fee...a dowry...for the privilege. (A tradition I am intending on reviving when Rachel reaches marriageable age ...35 or so.)

When the arrangements were agreed to, the couple was technically married. The groom would return to his father's house and prepare a place ...perhaps an addition ...where he and his new wife would eventually live. They didn't live together at this time nor did they have sexual relations. But the community considered them husband and wife. If the husband-to-be died during this engagement period, the woman was actually considered a widow. This is why, when Joseph found

out that Mary was pregnant, he prepared to divorce her quietly. Even though they were only betrothed, it was as if they were married.

About twelve months later, the groom would return, dressed in his finest garments. No one knew for sure when he would arrive. Often, it was at midnight. His attendants would call to the bride's house shouting, "The bridegroom has come. Come out. The bridegroom has come." The bride would come out, veiled and accompanied by her maidens who were each carrying lamps. (Remember the parable of the maidens who hadn't enough oil for their lamps?) Then they would go together to the groom's father's house. A brief ceremony would take place. And then, the party began...a party that lasted from 7-14 days. Okay, dads...how would you like to pay for THAT wedding reception?

Does that background help you appreciate this text a little more? Jesus...the groom...has returned. His bride...we...has prepared herself for his arrival. And we are going to have the party of the ages. But what is the price? What price did the groom pay to purchase us ...his beloved bride? His own blood. He paid our dowry with his blood on the cross of Calvary. And then, on Easter Sunday, he rose again from the dead. Do you remember his words to his disciples? "In my father's house are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you." That is bridegroom talk.

If we are followers of Jesus, we are engaged to the Lamb! What that means is, we have nothing to worry about. No question as to whether or not he will go through with it. I went through a broken engagement. It was a very painful process. I know many of you did as well. But Jesus will never change his mind. Jesus will never break his word. As far as he is concerned, the deal is done. All that is left is the party.

There is one thing that I want to raise on this Mother's Day. Most of you mothers started as wives. I'm sure you remember your wedding day as if it was yesterday. I know I remember mine. I was already a pastor. I had performed many weddings.

But I was so nervous at my wedding that I actually told my best man, Dan, that I thought I was going to throw up. Finally, I made it out to the front of the church. The music started, the doors opened, and there before me was a vision of loveliness like I had never seen before or since. Spotless. Without blemish. Perfect.

I had written a song to sing to Cyndi from the piano. I intended to look at her as I sang it. Bad idea! I was so emotional that all I could do was look down at the keyboard as I sang and try to keep from weeping. After waiting for 32 years, it was a hallelujah moment for me if ever there was one.

One of the challenges we faced, however, was the reception. We had hundreds of folks at the wedding...I think the whole church turned out. We wanted to have a celebration with all of them, so we had a reception right there at the church. But we also wanted to have a more intimate party for family and close friends. We had it at C.I. Shenanigans, looking out over the water. For a guy that doesn't like to dance, I bunny hopped and conga lined my little heart out. I was a married man!

But the hardest decision we had was who to invite to that second reception. We had so many folks that we loved. But the room would only hold so many and, frankly, the checkbook could only AFFORD so many.

The wedding feast of the lamb is an entirely different story. There is plenty of room. The father has unlimited resources. The table has been laid. No, the biggest issue is not whom to invite. Who is invited? ALL are invited...any who would come. The issue is not the invitations. The issue is the same issue all you brides and mothers' of the brides dealt with on your weddings. What is it? The R.S.V.P. The invitations have gone out and now, the Lamb simply waits. To see who will take him up on his offer. To see who will say "yes" to his gracious invitation. But here's the difference. When we don't R.S.V.P. to the THIS invitation, we aren't just ditching the party. We are leaving the groom standing at the altar.

My friends, the greatest invitation ever has been sent to us. The Lamb of God...Jesus, the son...invites all who would come to be united to him in holy and eternal matrimony. To live in relationship with him forever. Have you said, "yes" to this gracious invitation? Or is it sitting somewhere, gathering dust? Wouldn't this Mother's Day be a great day to respond to the most gracious invitation you will ever receive?

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

THE BRIDE OF CHRIST

Revelation 19:4-10

Pastor Mark Toone

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- · *Hallelujah means, literally, "you praise Yahweh." Revelation 19 is the only occurrence of the word "hallelujah" in the whole book. Why here? Why, suddenly, do we discover this level of excitement and exuberance?*
- · *Read Matthew 22:1-14 and Matthew 25:1-13. How do these insights into the marriage customs of the time help you to understand about our marriage to the Lamb of God?*
- · *Why does Jesus use the metaphor of marriage to describe his relationship to us, the church? In Revelation 19:7, the text says that "the Lamb has come" and that "the bride has made herself ready?" In what way can we prepare ourselves? In what way are we absolutely dependent upon the initiative of the Lamb?*
- · *If we are engaged to Jesus, using that same metaphor, how ought we to behave? (i.e., remember what it was like to be engaged. How did you behave during that time? How ought we behave as the betrothed of Jesus?*