

# Heaven's Joy

By Brad Allison on 8/29/2004

Scripture Reference *Revelation 19*

We've seen throughout the weeks of our study that the book of Revelation shows us the future. Chapters 18-19 are a pair that need to be looked at together. Chapter 18, in describing the judgment upon Babylon, shows the outcome of a life of self-trust. Babylon represents the kingdoms of the world that are against the Lord. Its citizens are those who have believed the first lie of Satan that those who eat of the forbidden fruit shall be like God. Chapter 19 shows the outcome for those who have taken a different path, the path of following Jesus and trusting in him. So there are two different roads and two different outcomes.

I have two realistic options available to me in the route I take to work everyday. In the journey from my house to the church office, I could take Highway 280 or Caldwell Mill Road. Imagine how helpful it would be if I had a permanent camera fixed at an elevation of 1000 feet above these two roads, and I could simply check the traffic from such a vantage point before making my daily decision. Revelation 18-19 gives to us just such a vantage point. Chapter 18 shows us the road of self-trust that wants to live a life independent of God. Its motto is "I can do it myself." Chapter 19 shows the road of trusting in God and following him. Its motto is "Salvation belongs to God." Not only are the roads different, but their destination is as well. The road of self-trust leads to complete emptiness, pictured in the first two verses of chapter 18 as a ghost-town. There is something haunting and tragically sad about a place that used to be bustling with activity, but then becomes a ghost-town, devoid of all people. What a contrast is seen in the road of trusting in God! It ends with a multitude of joyful people, singing and shouting with all their might. So one road leads to desolation, the other to celebration.

We're going to look this morning at the joy of those who choose the path of trusting in God. Where does it lead? It leads to everlasting joy in heaven. But this is also the same joy that is available to us now. Heavenly joy is available on the earth to the degree that we trust in God. Heavenly joy is not a different kind of joy, only a different degree of joy. As we see what gives joy to the citizens of heaven, we can also see what gives joy to us. I want to point out four things that energize the joy of those in heaven. It is the worship of God, the reign of God, the feast of God and the transforming power of God. In a word, it's all about God.

## I. The Worship of God

Once again we see that the citizens of heaven are worshiping God. The multitude portrayed here as worshiping is almost without doubt the redeemed children of God, not some angelic host. Notice a couple of things about their worship. First, they are unified. They are all shouting these words together. Several years ago, hundreds of thousands of Christian men held a rally in Washington D.C. I understand that one of the speakers, Max Lucado, asked all the men to shout out at once the names of their denominations. It was a loud noise, but completely cacophonous. He then asked them, "Who died to rescue you from your sins?" And a mighty roar went up as hundreds of thousands of men shouted in unison the name of Jesus. Such will be the unity and power of heaven's worship.

I notice something else about their worship. It builds in intensity as different groups worship God. Verses 1-3 describe the worship of the multitude of the redeemed, followed by the worship of the 24 elders and these four creatures. After that, a voice speaks words of praise. And then notice what happens when the multitude of the redeemed resume their praise of God. We read this time not just that it was a loud voice, which was the description of verse 1. But now their voice was "like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty

peals of thunder” (v. 6). Its intensity builds as these worshipers see others worshiping. This is one of the big reasons we will never have virtual worship through the internet. Our worship is energized as we see others around us truly worshiping.

Illustration: At a recent SS class on worship, someone in our church said that one of the things God used in his life to bring him to the Lord was attending a worship service once and sitting beside someone who was really worshiping. To see another worship encourages our own.

So the joy of heaven is due in part to the worship that takes place there. I know our worship on earth is far from heaven’s worship, but that doesn’t change the fact that worship can be a source of the greatest form of joy even now. Let’s keep that as one of our desires for our earthly worship.

## II. The Reign of God

The heavenly worshipers are worshiping God because he reigns. They say, “Salvation and glory and power belong to our God” and “the Lord our God the Almighty reigns” (v. 1, 6). God’s reign is seen in at least two ways here. First, his reign is seen in the fact that he has taken care of evil, which is personified here as the great prostitute, and judged her completely. The residents of heaven praise God when they witness his judgment of evil, because “the smoke from her goes up forever and ever” (v. 3). Some see this as a sub-Christian attitude. Is it not wrong to rejoice in the judgment of others? Dan Allender speaks of a phone conversation he had with his father after he had returned from a chemotherapy treatment.

He was weak and frail. He had a portable phone and was talking to me as he walked to the upstairs bathroom. He said he was feeling ill and may need to hang up quickly. When he got to the doorway he stumbled, and I heard him crash to the floor. The phone fell out of his hands and slid out of his reach. He began vomiting. For the next twenty minutes I listened helplessly as he purged the poison out of his system.

I was powerless. I could do nothing. At first I wanted to hang up so I did not have to hear his retching nor feel my rage and battle with my urge to withdraw. Instead, I stayed on the phone and prayed for him and dreamt of the day when I would be able to put my foot on the neck of evil and make the evil one pay for my father’s agony (*The Healing Path*, p. 142).

God will solve the problem of evil once and for all. When he says that the smoke goes up from her forever and ever, what he means is that the demise of evil will be permanent. We will receive constant reassurance of this in heaven. If you’ve ever been really hurt by evil, you know that it is easy to get a little gun-shy about it. If the phone has ever awakened you at night with bad news on the other end, your response every time the phone awakens you at night is a momentary fear of more bad news. But in heaven, there will be a constant reminder that the Lord reigns, and in his reign he has done away with evil forever. His children will never be troubled by it again.

There’s a second aspect of God’s reign here, indicated in the title given God in verse 6, where we read, “For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.” The word “Almighty” means literally the one who holds all things in his control. And then note that this God is *our* God, meaning that he uses this absolute control for the good of his people. How does an acknowledgement of God’s control over all things lead us to joy? It delivers us from anxiety. Anxiety is the inevitable result of taking control of one’s life, usurping that control from God. Can you imagine the kind of joy that would result from being so filled with a sense of God’s control that one’s life is completely free of all anxiety forever and ever? That’s the joy of

heaven. Let's apply this to ourselves. God is calling us here to a complete, daily surrender to his sovereign control over your life. It is the path to freedom from anxiety. Listen to the following account from Jack Miller, founder of World Harvest Mission.

In the early 1980's one of our WHM missionaries and I stopped over in Geneva on our way home from Uganda. We went into a café and ordered lunch. A Swiss man in the café helped us in the ordering of our meal. He said he was a banker. When he found out that we were missionaries, he told us that he no longer went to church because "I never heard anything in the sermons I could not have thought of myself."

Having acknowledged the weaknesses of the church, I then said, "But I think I know something about you. Your inner life is full of deep anxieties."

Our new Swiss friend looked astonished. "How," he asked, "could you know that about me!" He did not for a moment deny the accuracy of the insight.

My answer? "It is not difficult to know. When you left the church you were taking control of your own life. You were no longer relying on God's control. Now you have to control your life by yourself. That is anxiety-producing because no human being can do it!" (*The Heart of a Servant Leader*, pp. 92-93).

### III. The Feast of God

The feast being spoken of in these verses is a wedding feast. So two analogies are used here to communicate something about heaven. It is like marriage and it is like a feast. Do you know what I mean by an analogy? An analogy is an explanation that says, "This thing you don't know about is something like this thing you do know about." For example, if you've ever tried to describe colors to a blind person, then you are forced to rely on analogy, because a blind person has no frame of reference in the area of sight. So you would have to find something in their world that is at least similar to the richness of color. You would have to say things like, "Yellow is bright, like the sound of a trumpet. Blue is a cool color, something like the feel of cold water running over your hand." We call these descriptions analogies. Those of us who can see know that such descriptions don't really do justice to these colors, but it's the best we can do. In the same way, God has to communicate heaven to us by use of analogies such as these two of food and marital intimacy.

Imagine the power of this image of a feast to those living in a situation where adequate food is never assured. One thing I've noticed about hunger is that it comes around about every six hours, unless you're 14 years old, in which case it comes about every two hours. A feast is a place where there is an abundance of food available immediately. As soon as the first inkling of hunger arrives, it can be immediately satisfied. Heaven is like that, too. It is the place where the first thought of a need is immediately followed by the meeting of that need. The reason is because God is in heaven and, having him, we have all we need.

The second analogy is that heaven is like the intimacy of marriage. Marriage is that relationship in which two people become one flesh. There is such a deep oneness that what happens to one spouse in a sense happens to them both. We would never dare to believe this about heaven unless God had told it to us. But it is revealed here that in heaven we become one with the Creator of the universe. He will become our husband and share everything with us. He will protect us, seeing any threat against us as a threat against him. He will sustain us, for what good husband ever refuses to provide for his wife if it is in his power to do so. He will make it his goal to bring happiness to our souls, just like all good husbands.

### IV. The Transforming Power of God

There is one key aspect to our wedding that is mentioned here, and that's our wedding clothes. Just as any bride takes care on her wedding day to be splendidly clothed, so we will be clothed splendidly with fine linen on this day. Clothing is a powerful image, one that occurs throughout the Bible to describe what God does for us. After Adam and Eve sinned, they felt shame because of being unclothed. Most of us can readily identify with this image. Do you ever have one of those dreams in which you are inadequately clothed in public? Shame is the most powerful of all feelings. Several years ago I remember reading of one of the church fathers (I forget which one), that he was anxious to become a martyr for the faith. There was a particular time, when he was still a young man and living at home with his parents, that he was prepared to go to his martyrdom through an open act of defiance against Rome. In her desire to prevent her son from doing this, his mother kept him safely at home simply by hiding all his clothes. Though he was willing to die for his faith, he was unwilling to go outside naked. It is this powerful sense of shame that we are delivered from here. We will be clothed splendidly in heaven, having all shame completely and permanently removed from us.

But what are these clothes? The text is clear in saying that "the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints" (v. 8). Doesn't this contradict other passages of Scripture which speak of the righteousness of Christ as our clothing which covers our shame? One commentator answers that like this: "This does not deny the Pauline doctrine of justification based on the righteous obedience of Christ, but suggests that a transformed life is the proper response to the call of the heavenly bridegroom" (Mounce, p. 340). If we really are covered with the righteousness of Christ, drinking in this truth that our wholeness is found in Christ, then that faith will inevitably transform us. This truth lies at the heart of our church's vision. We say that we believe God wants us to be a place where the gospel changes lives for the glory of God. How does that happen? It happens as we look in faith to Jesus to be the one who covers us completely with his righteousness. Or to say it another way, it happens as we renounce all self-effort at perfectionism and realize that we have a perfect righteousness in Jesus.

Illustration: As we were watching the Olympics this week, our daughter Kathryn remarked about how glad she was that she wasn't a gymnast. She said this right after we saw a gymnast do a perfect routine except for taking a tiny little hop on the mat during the dismount. For that one little mistake, he lost the gold medal. There are many people who live under just such burdens. Jesus frees us from them by clothing us in the fine linen of his righteousness. To the degree that we believe that, we are changed people who are able to love God and others.

## CONCLUSION:

A friend of mine wrote me an e-mail this week in which he told about a guy who had attended an early morning Bible study taught by my friend. This fellow kept lifting his hands and pulling them to his chest as they were discussing the wonders of the gospel. When my friend finally asked him what was he doing, he said, "we will receive." He continued, "You win the toss at the beginning of a football game" and you then receive the ball. The gospel is all about what we receive.

We have been looking this morning at the end of the road for all who follow Jesus and trust in him. The end of the road is one of unspeakable joy, characterized by worship, the reign of God, the feast of God and the transforming power of God. Let us place our hope firmly in this and never let go of it. As we take of the Lord's Supper this morning, I want to invite you to repent of anything that may be keeping you from heaven's joy. Perhaps you have been anxious because you have stopped believing that he is the supreme ruler, and you've been

thinking that you are. Such an attitude will take away all your joy, so repent of that and come to the one who died for us, and who covers us completely with his blood.