

TWO DIFFERENT DINNERS

SERIES: WAKE UP



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Revelation 19
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My wife and I like to watch The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon. We can't stay up that late, so we watch old episodes on Hulu. One of our favorite segments is "Hashtags," where Jimmy Fallon asks people to send in funny stories in a particular theme. He did one recently on #weddingfail. Here are a few stories:

From @MikeOlbinski. My wife's dad officiated our ceremony. He pronounced us "Jina and Chad." My name is Mike. #WeddingFail

From @Laura_Hartleytx. Both of our moms missed the reception because they were trapped in the elevator. They forgot to press the button for level one. #WeddingFail

From @twilesque910. I'd always wanted to release butterflies at my wedding. It was such a hot day that the butterflies dropped dead on the guests and all over the yard. My dog ran around and ate them. #WeddingFail¹

As a pastor, weddings are one of my favorite things to do. It's such a powerful moment in time. A room is full of people who have poured their lives into the man and the woman getting married. A lot of preparation goes into that day. At the same time, the event itself is mostly about what's to come: a new marriage beginning that day.

The wedding day is a pivot. It's the end of preparation and planning, but it's the beginning of the marriage. I think that's why it is such a joyful event. There is a celebration of the past and anticipation of the future. It's beautiful.

This morning as we continue our series in the book of Revelation, we will be invited to a wedding celebration. We've called this series "Wake Up" because we're hoping that these incredible visions throughout the book will help us to see our world differently. Our passage this morning can help us to understand the season of time that we live in more fully.

In Revelation, we see the feast of a joyful wedding. But it will not be the only feast we witness. In fact, there are two kinds of feasts with two kinds of invitations.

As we dig into this chapter, we will hear described two different dinners.

One dinner will be overflowing with joy. The other will be full of horror. When we encounter the contrast between these two dinners, if we've been sleeping, we can't help but be woken up.

We began this series in September, and now we're nearing the end of the book. All along, everything has been moving toward the climax of the action. This book opened with a dramatic vision of Jesus. Then we read seven letters which Jesus wrote to the seven churches of the first century. After that, we were invited into the throne room of God, where we have been witnessing the opening of God's scroll. This scroll contains God's ultimate plans for his creation.

We've seen three different cycles of judgment that God is pouring out and will pour out in the last days. First, the seven seals. Then seven trumpets. Finally, the seven bowls of wrath. In the middle of all that, we saw God seal his people in order to identify and protect them. And in the last few weeks, we've been witnessing the judgment of evil. We saw the beast and the prostitute and the great city of Babylon judged.

If all of this sounds new and confusing, you only need to understand that we have been watching God clearing the world of evil so that his perfect kingdom can find its home on the earth. Today we see a big part of that kingdom's arrival: the entrance of the king.

If you consider yourself a follower of Jesus Christ, this is absolutely critical for your faith. Our faith in Christ is a belief in history. We believe in the historical event of his resurrection from the dead and we believe in the future event of his return to earth. We don't just believe in Jesus here and now. Our faith is about what happened in the past and what will happen in the future.

If you don't consider yourself a Christian, then this passage suggests a view of the world that you should grapple with. If this view is true, then it's the most significant thing in the world.

There is the one dinner you want to be invited to and one you don't want to attend—one of infinite joy and possibility and another of eternal pain and death.

My hope is that we will grow in our anticipation of the wedding we see described. History is moving toward these two extremes. Every one of us is preparing for one of these two dinners. When we see that and really grasp that perspective, nothing will ever be the same.

Praise for God's justice

Before we get to the first feast, our passage starts with a scene of heavenly worship. It's connected to what happened in the previous chapter where we saw Babylon, the great city being judged by God. This is what happens in response to that judgment:

Revelation 19:1-5:

After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying out, "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, 2 for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants." 3 Once more they cried out, "Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up forever and ever." 4 And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who was seated on the throne, saying, "Amen. Hallelujah!" 5 And from the throne came a voice saying, "Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, small and great."

We saw a similar scene last week where heaven rejoiced at the destruction of Babylon.

We've seen this multitude before. It's the same group described in Revelation 7. They were described as the 144,000 and then as a multitude that no one could count. This is the people of God—those who worship Jesus and stay faithful to him.

This crowd is singing "Hallelujah." That's a Hebrew word meaning "Praise Yahweh". In fact, this is the only place in the New Testament that we find this word because it isn't a Greek word at all. It's just carried over from Hebrew. First, the multitude sings, then the elders and living creatures join in. Finally, a voice from the throne completes the praise.

Why are they praising Yahweh? Because he is just. Because he judged Babylon. Because he didn't allow evil to reign on this earth. The judgment of God is good news because God doesn't allow evil to win.

This is one of the answers to the age-old problem of evil: how can you believe in a good God when there is so much evil? Because right now, God is waiting. He's giving people a chance to turn away from evil by their own decision. But he will not wait forever. He will judge evil. We can praise him for that.

We've seen a lot of judgment in Revelation. Some of it has been hard to see, and we'll see more of that soon. I hope we've gained an understanding of his judgment. Maybe we even accept it, but can we praise him for it? Can we give God thanks that he will eventually judge evil once and for all?

We can begin there. Praise God for his judgment.

Judges almost never get praised. It's a thankless job. Someone is always upset. But throughout Revelation, we have been seeing our God intervene in this world with a judgment that is just and fair and merciful.

I have a new appreciation for the complexity of God's judgment. As I get older and face more situations, I can see everything from multiple angles. The world doesn't look as black and white as it used to.

I'm glad that I'm not the one who has to judge the world. But I see even more so than ever that this world needs a judge. We need someone impartial to intervene and set things right. I'm so glad our God is a judge. This gives me so much freedom.

We're going to have a chance after the sermon to sing hallelujah and hear our praise connect with the praise of heaven. But first, let's get a better picture of what we're praising God for. Why is this wedding so incredible?

Prepare for Jesus' return

In the next section of our passage, we get invited to the feast. We find the same multitude as before celebrating not the justice of God, but his wedding.

Revelation 19:6-10:

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters

and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, 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 it was granted her to clothe herself 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 the 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 brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God.” For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.

There is a long tradition in the Bible of comparing God’s relationship to his people with a marriage. That metaphor is used in Isaiah 54:5 and Jeremiah 2:2. And in Ephesians, the apostle Paul gives practical instructions to men and women regarding marriage before saying, “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (Ephesians 5:32).

This makes sense. If God is love and marriage is one of the highest and most intimate forms of love between two people, then it makes sense for there to be some connection.

The focus of this passage is how the bride prepares herself for the wedding.

That preparation happens today. The groomsmen just show up at the church after a shower, but the bride does her hair and her nails. She prepares her skin. She puts on the dress she chose for this special day. The bride looks her best on her wedding day.

In our passage, there is an interesting tension. We understand the bride here to refer to the people of God. We are told that the beautiful clothes represent her righteous deeds. So the bride prepares herself by doing the will of God.

But on the other hand, we are told: “it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure.” So the bride makes herself ready, but she is given her clothes as a gift.

Do we make ourselves ready for Jesus by doing good works? Or does Jesus make us ready for himself by giving

us good works? Which one is it? Are we doing good things or is Jesus working through us?

Yes.

From our perspective, we prepare ourselves. God works in us, but he has created us to use our efforts toward his purposes. When we act like God in the world, caring for his creation and his people and doing his will, we are preparing ourselves for Jesus. So this is what we do now: we prepare ourselves for Jesus.

I have sympathy for couples as they go through the wedding planning process. It can be grueling, but I always remind them that nothing they are doing is wasted effort. It may not matter that much what color your tablecloths are. But in making that decision together, the couple is learning lessons that will help them in their marriage.

Think about all that is stressful about planning a wedding: extended family, money, the role of friends, activities, and fun. Those are the things that can cause a lot of stress and conflict in marriage, so planning a wedding is a perfect first project for the couple to learn how to partner in life.

We are in that period now. We are preparing for Jesus. Many of the things we do today don’t really matter for eternity. Does building a company last? Does mastering your education continue forever? Can you take your money with you?

But all the things you do to prepare for Jesus last forever. Your relationship with God and your relationship with other people are eternal. They start here, but they continue forever. Learning to love and forgive and accommodate and teach and open up—all those things are great preparation for a life in eternity.

How much of your energy and time and money is spent on eternal things? Are you preparing for Jesus or for retirement? What are looking toward? What are you living toward?

We prepare for Jesus, but God is also preparing us. All those hard things that we go through as we struggle to stay faithful are doing something important in us. Listen to what the apostle Paul has to say:

2 Corinthians 4:17-18:

For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory

beyond all comparison, 18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

If you believe in Jesus, whatever you are going through is preparing you for glory beyond anything you can imagine. Look to that! Look to the things that are unseen. They are the things that matter. They are the things that are eternal.

It's so easy to get sidetracked. Even in this Revelation passage, as the apostle John sees this vision, his initial response is to worship the angel. In response to this wedding, he falls into idolatry! It's too easy to focus on the things that are seen. God gives us these visions to help us to see into eternity and to see what can't be seen.

The next vision gives us an image to sustain us. Why do we work so hard to prepare for the wedding? Because the marriage is going to be incredible.

The arrival of Jesus

We finally arrive at one of the moments that all of Revelation has been building toward: Jesus arrives.

Revelation 19:11-16:

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it 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 written that no one knows but himself. 13 He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. 14 And the armies of heaven, arrayed in 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 winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. 16 On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.

The groom has come to his wedding. And what an entrance it is! He rides a white horse. He carries a huge sword. He leads a massive army of his followers. He has conquered and is conquering the world. What strikes

me most about this passage is the many names that Jesus is given.

He is "Faithful and True." If there was one quality you'd want in a husband, this would probably top the list. You can be handsome and rich and powerful and charming, but if you're aren't faithful, what's the point?

This groom is "The Word of God." These few words contain a universe of meaning which we can only begin to unwrap. He is the way we understand God as words are the way we communicate with each other. He is the one who was at the beginning when creation was spoken into existence. He is the revelation of God as this book is. Like this book, he is fully divine and fully human.

But he is also the "King of Kings" and "Lord of Lords." This was a direct challenge to the power of Rome. The pledge of allegiance in the Roman empire was the simple claim, "Caesar is Lord." Well, if Caesar is Lord, then Jesus is the "Lord of lords."

Then there's the name which no one knows.

Many cultures have myths that knowing someone's name gives you power over them. Ra, the sun god of Egypt, accidentally revealed his name to Isis. This gave Isis the power to put her own son on the throne. The legend of Rumpelstiltskin hinged on the fact that no one knew his name. And there is of course, "he who must not be named," the arch-enemy of Harry Potter. ²

There is power in a name. The fact that Jesus has a name which we don't know yet means a few things. It means he is powerful. He is Sovereign. He controls everything. No one competes with Jesus for power.

It also means that there is a part of Jesus we don't fully know yet. But we will. When Jesus comes to earth, we will know his secret name. For followers of Jesus, we can look forward to a kind of spiritual intimacy with God that we can only begin to imagine in this life.

Not only do we prepare for Jesus, we anticipate his return.

One of the reasons you look forward to getting married is because of the wedding night. As I talk to couples preparing for marriage, we always talk about their physical relationship. When you're in love with someone, and you're getting closer with them emotionally, it is a struggle to wait to have sex. Yet something good happens in that waiting.

When Jesus returns, we will have a kind of intimacy with him that we can't imagine. Sex is only an analogy.

I've been going through some difficult circumstances lately. In the midst of those, I've found a deeper connection with Jesus.

It helps me to know that whatever I'm experiencing doesn't compare to what I will have when Jesus comes back. In this life, I always want more.

Look forward to it! Anticipate it with excitement even as you prepare yourself for it. Jesus is going to return!

The battle that wasn't fought

As we've seen throughout the book of Revelation, the return of Jesus isn't good news for everyone. Now we see the second dinner of our passage, and it is a very different dinner.

Revelation 19:17-21:

Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, "Come, gather for the great supper of God, 18 to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great." 19 And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who was sitting on the horse and against his army. 20 And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. 21 And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.

Think back to that poor bride who wanted butterflies at her wedding. Instead of beauty, her dog feasted on the dead butterflies in her backyard. The image at the end of Revelation 19 is a dark parody of the wedding feast we saw earlier. We are meant to compare the two.

The beauty of the first and the horror of the second. The joy of the first with the grief of the second. The

promise and hope of the first and the finality of the second. The second feast is a terrible image; it's disgusting and horrifying.

I've only seen a bird or two pecking at road kill. Can you imagine the aftermath of a huge battle? The beast and the prophet are thrown into the lake of fire. We'll see more of that next week. Then the rest was killed immediately. It wasn't even a fight; it was more of an execution than a battle.

Then, there were thousands lying dead in the valley of Armageddon. Swarms of birds feasting on their flesh. It's a terrible image. It's disturbing, and that's exactly what it is meant to be.

The image of this second feast confronts us head-on with the dual realities of eternity. On the one hand, there is joy and promise and love of eternal marriage to God. On the other hand, there is the lake of fire which burns forever.

Hell is real. There is an eternity of being separated from God. The book of Revelation has been about God showing people the consequences of their sin so that they might repent and turn to him. But most of them don't.

We don't like to think about hell, but we don't like to think about taxes either, and we have to. When we see a picture like this—the beauty of eternal life and the horror of eternal punishment—there are many implications.

This picture should change the way we live. It should serve as a warning. All of us ought to be warned because of the future.

I believe that most people in our culture think everything is going to work out in the end; if there is anything after this life, then I'm sure it's good for everyone. Where does that idea come from? What evidence could possibly lead to that conclusion? What a terribly discouraging conclusion that really is. No matter what happens, no matter what you do, everyone is fine, and everything works out in the end.

But Revelation gives us a different picture of the future. If you have been here this morning, you have seen it. Your eyes have seen the future. You have been warned. If you already know Jesus, this can motivate you for the people in your life who don't know Jesus.

If you're investigating faith, then Revelation is a warning.

More than that, it's an invitation. You have received an invitation to the wedding feast of the Lamb of God. The one who laid down his life for you wants to know you. He has borne the cost for all of your brokenness. He has welcomed you into an eternal relationship with Him.

It's not so much the threat of hell that drives people toward God as the promise of eternal glory. Why would you pass this up? Why would you turn down an invitation to the first feast in preference to the second feast?

Conclusion

Weddings don't always go as planned. Despite all the preparation we put into making sure everything is perfect, plenty of people have stories which could fall under the category of #WeddingFail.

But the wedding that we have witnessed today in Revelation is an exception. God has been preparing for this wedding since the foundation of the world. Maybe even earlier. Who knows what God has been doing before creation itself began?

Right now, we are at a unique point in God's preparations. Jesus has already come to earth once to woo his bride. He's coming back to celebrate the wedding. For followers of Jesus, this is the season of engagement.

Engagement is an awkward time. You want to be married, not engaged. There's a lot of preparations to be made that you find challenging and difficult. You want to come together as one in sexual intimacy with your partner, but you are waiting until the time is right. It's just a strange in-between kind of period.

But today we've seen the moment where history pivots. Jesus returns; the wedding feast is celebrated, and the marriage begins.

For now, we wait and prepare. We anticipate and we invite everyone we can think of to join us in the celebration. Save the date. The wedding feast of Jesus is coming, and you're invited.

Endnotes

¹ *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, S5E131, "Hashtags:#WeddingFail," aired on May 16, 2019.

² "Lord Voldemort." Wikipedia.org. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_Voldemort (accessed May 9, 2019).