

Revelation as Trilogy
The Return of the King
Chapters 19: Victory – Part 1

Introduction: This chapter stands in stark contrast to the previous one. Here, rather than listening to mourning, we hear rejoicing over the fall of the city/empire. In some ways this is an expansion on the brief word of celebration in Chapter 18. What we notice in this celebration is that it is not the celebration of the 144,000 but of the multitude. In addition, this chapter offers a description of the first phase of God's victory over the powers of evil in and through the work of Jesus and the saints.

The Story: The chapter begins with the great celebration in heaven and moves from the outer circle to the inner circle. It begins with praise emanating from the great multitude of saints that cannot be numbered, then moves to the twenty-four elders, then to the four living creatures and finally to the throne of the lamb. The song that is sung is based on Exodus psalms reminding the people that God is a liberating God. They are a reminder that God is the only one with the power to save the saints because their captivity is both physical and spiritual. The command to fear God does not mean to be afraid, but to be in awe of this liberating God.

The next section of praise has to do with preparation for the arrival of the new king. This is made clear in that the language references the final Hallel Psalms (Psalms 93:1; 97:1; 99:1) which were used at the arrival and coronation of a king. These words of praise are pronouncing that not only has the enemy been defeated but that the new king will take his place on the throne. The writer then speaks of the marriage of the Lamb and the bride that is ready for the ceremony. Note how this image of marriage contrasts with the image of the prostitute language describing Babylon; it is faithfulness to God versus unfaithfulness to God.

What follows is the fourth of seven blessings, or beatitudes, in Revelation, "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." The previous three beatitudes can be found in 1:3, 14:13 and 16:15. These three beatitudes focus on faithfulness (those who hear and keep this vision; who die in the Lord; and who stay awake and is clothed...meaning in holiness). This fourth benediction is the culmination of those three benedictions in that those who have been faithful are blessed to be invited to the marriage feast where they will find new life. At this point, John, upon learning that these are the words of God and not an angel, falls down to worship the angelic messenger. A warning is given that such worship is inappropriate because only God and not the messenger is to be worshipped.

At this point the narrative shifts from heavenly praise to heaven's new assault on the forces of evil. Once again the heavenly curtain is drawn back far enough to allow the Jesus, the one who is faithful and true, who judges and makes war, whose eyes are filled with the Spirit (fire), who holds all power (many diadems on his head), who is clothed in a white robe dipped in blood (the crucifixion) and who is the Word of God (from the Gospel of John) to launch his assault. He leads the armies of heaven who confront the armies of the beast. In an instant the first battle is over, the beast and the false prophet are captured and thrown into the Lake of fire and the rest are killed with the word of God.

Reflection: The images in this chapter, though unfamiliar to us, would have been overly familiar to their original audience. War, violence, death and corpses in the fields were part and parcel of life in the Roman Empire. The enemies of the Empire would have been humiliated and executed. The difference here is that Jesus comes as liberator of the innocent and a dispenser of justice. He is not conquering for the sake of conquest, but instead defeats the forces of evil so that life in all its fullness might reign.

Questions:

1. Where in your own life have you experienced Jesus as a liberating power?
2. How do you understand the image of the marriage feast of the Lamb?
3. How do you hold in tension the images of Jesus as warrior and Jesus as sacrifice?