

The Conquering Christ

Message 11

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Revelation 19:5-20:15

The Prince and the Princess

“And they lived happily ever after.” Isn’t that how every fairy tale ends? When all hope is lost, the gallant young prince dashes up to rescue the beautiful princess from the clutches of some evil villain. The reason these stories resonate so deeply within us and are found in every culture is that they are versions of the real fairy tale. All of history is the story of a beautiful princess rescued from a villain by a handsome prince.

The story began back in the Garden of Eden. It was paradise. God had created a splendid world full of delights for the man and woman – luscious fruit, magnificent and cheerful animals, sun, moon, and stars – it was simply wonderful. But evil lurked, and one day the serpent struck and attacked the princess of the earth. The prince had been appointed to guard the garden, but instead of driving out the serpent, he watched as it seduced his bride. Eve sinned first, then Adam sinned, and no one lived happily ever after. Into this heart-rending tragedy God appeared, and promised to rescue them by a child the woman would bear. Ever since, all women have been looking for their prince charming and all men have been striving to rescue their bride. But every story ends prematurely. The prince’s rescue is never a complete success, and the princess is never completely faithful to her prince. Every story is a partial failure, because they both need a savior.

Abraham was a prince among men, and Sarah was the beauty that kings fought over. But Abraham allowed Sarah to be captured, and Sarah struggled to believe in God. Jacob worked seven years for his beloved, and got her sister instead! Othniel conquered Hebron to win his bride. Samson killed a lion with his bare hands and defeated 30 Philistines for love, but his wife was given to another man. David circumcised 200 Philistines involuntarily and gave their foreskins to Saul as a dowry for Michal, but she despised David for worshiping the Lord. Abigail faithfully served her husband, but he exposed her to violence. When her husband died David married Abigail. All these true stories of the Bible are examples of the longing for the fairy tale to come true, and proof that it never does. You can add your own version of the failed fairy tale to this catalog of disappointments.

When God sent prophets to warn Israel about her sin and call her to repentance, they often used marriage as a metaphor to show God’s relationship with His people. Isaiah opened his prophecy crying out, “How the faithful city has become a whore!” (Isaiah 1:21) Jeremiah spoke even more strongly against Israel.

You have played the whore with many lovers; and would you return to me? declares the LORD. ² Lift up your eyes to the bare heights, and see! Where have you not been ravished? By the waysides you have sat awaiting lovers like an Arab in the wilderness. You have polluted the land with your vile whoredom. (Jeremiah 3:1-2)

God commanded the prophet Hosea to marry an adulteress to illustrate His relationship with Israel. Predictably, Hosea’s wife ran away and prostituted herself with other men. Here is how God promises to respond to faithless Israel for whoring with other men.

Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. ¹⁵ And there I will give her her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. ¹⁶ “And in that day, declares the LORD, you will call me ‘My Husband,’ and no longer will you call me ‘My Master.’” (Hosea 2:14-16)

This beautiful passage is the promise that there will come a day when the prince will succeed in rescuing the princess for good, and the princess will remain faithful forever. And now we come to the end of history and see that the fairy tale does come true. Someday there will be a happily ever after.

The Bride

Tonight's passage opens with a fantastic celebration. It is the wedding of the king! All of heaven and earth are in a tizzy. Imagine bakers baking, tailors sewing, carpenters building, jewelers crafting – everyone is busy getting ready for the great day. Never in the history of the world has anything like this happened – when God took His bride for His own.

This is a doubly festive occasion, for it follows the long, hard war against deadly rebels. It was a pitched battle that dragged on for decades. Two horrible monsters led the rebels as they fought in cities all over the empire. Thousands of faithful soldiers died for their Lord as the monsters chased the bride from place to place. They dragged her into their arenas and amused themselves by torturing her. By the end the bride was torn, stripped naked, beaten into unconsciousness. The real beauty of the realm was Babylon, a woman bred for the throne with looks to die for. Until the end she appeared to be the one who would win the hand of the king. But just when the bride breathed her last, the king arrived and turned the battle. He routed the rebels and captured the monsters, who at the last minute had killed Babylon, the secret collaborator. Then He bent down and breathed new life into His bride with His kiss. She was dirty, beaten, and half-dead – not at all the stunning beauty like Babylon. But the king loved her. He gently washed her, fed her, clothed her, and told her that, tattered as she was, He still loved her more than all the beauties, all the treasures of all the earth.

Now look, the bride appears in radiant glory! You could never imagine that the woman battered by the monsters could shine so. She is still the same woman, but her flaws are covered by brilliant clothing. Now she comes as queen, beside the Lamb her husband. She who was so despised on earth is now the queen of heaven! All heaven and earth are rejoicing in the marriage of God and man. Nothing like this has ever happened. No one ever imagined something so wonderful! So bakers are baking scrumptious pies, cakes, and pasties; tailors are making royal garments for everyone to wear; carpenters are building tables for the meal and a floor for the dancing. Jewelers are making necklaces and bracelets and rings of diamonds and emeralds and rubies and pearls for all the women to wear. All the treasures of the universe are brought out to celebrate the marriage of God and man!

The Warrior

We have already seen the groom in several scenes. He is the Terminator, the mighty warrior who guards the church with His invincible power. He is the faithful witness who sees everything with His x-ray eyes and always tells the truth. He is the Lamb who died to save His people from their sin, but came back to life to rescue them from their enemies. He is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah who rules His people in righteousness. He is the second, and last, and true Adam – who is everything a man should be. He is the knight in shining armor who resists the seduction of the whore and rescues his bride from the terrible monsters.

Now we see the king at the head of His army. Here the picture is complete, as the previous images all combine to reveal fully the majestic glory of the Lord. He rides the white horse of victory. His name is Faithful and True. He judges and makes war righteously. He has the fiery eyes that see everything and wears the crowns of all the kingdoms of the earth. He wears a robe baptized in blood and is called The Word of God. He bears a sharp sword that destroys nations, and carries the iron scepter with which He rules them. He tramples the winepress of Almighty God's wrath. Who is this man? He is King of kings and Lord of lords! This is the Supreme Lord of heaven and earth. All men and angels bow before Him and worship Him. This is Jesus, your lover.

Now we must pause a moment to interrupt these wonderful visions and ask what they correspond to. What do these things symbolize, and when shall they happen? The marriage of the Lamb happened when Babylon was destroyed and the monsters put to flight. By A.D. 70 the church was in ruins. Most of the apostles had been killed along with thousands of Christians. Those who had survived were hiding in cities, towns, and the countryside to escape the murderous Jews and Romans. Early in the decade of the 60s they had obeyed Jesus' commands and fled Jerusalem. They came out of Babylon and escaped her destruction. When the dust settled, Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple burned, and all that remained was the half-dead church. Jesus resurrected the church from these ruins and began rebuilding the new temple He had begun at Pentecost.

Following the wedding metaphor, Jesus was betrothed to the church during His earthly ministry. When He ascended to the Father, He sent wedding gifts to the church – notably the Holy Spirit. But the wedding had to be postponed while the monsters and whore were dealt with. When they were out of the way, the wedding was held and the marriage completed. This means that our relationship to Jesus is much closer than anyone had previously experienced. This is part of what Jesus meant when He said that the one who is least in the Kingdom is greater than John the Baptist.

Now that we are married to Jesus we have free us access to His house. Before you marry someone you may visit him, but you do not live with him until the wedding. Until this point God's people were visitors to His house. They were *welcome* visitors, and they were far better off than everyone else on earth who was barred from approaching God. But now we have moved in! Did you notice a gradual shift in the description of heaven in Revelation? In chapter 4:1, the beginning of the visions of the future, John enters through a doorway into heaven. Then in chapter 11:19 the temple in heaven was opened, allowing further access to God. In chapter 15:5 the sanctuary was opened. Now in 19:11 all heaven is open. The church is now the queen of heaven, and all heaven is open to her. Now Psalm 27 is fulfilled.

One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to inquire in his temple.

Psalm 27:4

The scene following the wedding is the description of Jesus riding forth to war with His armies behind Him. At this point the decisive battle with the dragon and the beasts is over. So what is the meaning of this military exercise? Is it a victory march? No, for verse 11 tells us He still makes war. This is a vision of Jesus' ongoing war against any new beast that arises to persecute His bride. The decisive battle is over. Satan attempted to kill the bride while she was still young and weak. It was a close call, but the Lamb was victorious. But there will be more battles. The war continues til the end of time. All through history Jesus rides forth throughout the earth to conquer His enemies – and in a shift of metaphor, His troops ride with Him. The bride is also a holy army mustered to fight evil and unbelief. In every age Satan brings forth new beasts, but Jesus always wins. Communism has been condemned to the rubbish heap of history. Fascism was defeated in World War II. Napoleon met his waterloo. Carl Sagan is dead and atheistic evolution is in its death throes. Any man or any belief system that attacks Jesus and his church will die and become food for the vultures. This is the promise of Jesus.

The Millennium

Now we come to chapter 20 and a topic that has sharply divided Christians in recent years – the millennium. Perhaps you thought that this topic would occupy a major part of our discussion of Revelation, but you can see that it consists of only six verses. Since this is such a popular topic, we will take a few minutes to review the major positions. The millennium is the 1,000 year reign of Christ described in this

passage, and there are three basic views. They are named according to when Jesus will return in His human body relative to the millennium. The premillennial position holds that Jesus will return *before* the 1,000 year reign. The postmillennial view teaches that Jesus will return *after* the 1,000 year reign. The amillennial view believes that the millennium is symbolic and that there is *no* 1,000 year reign of Jesus. Now obviously these various positions conceive the reign of Jesus differently. In the premillennial view Jesus reigns as a physical presence in His resurrected body on earth. The other two views conceive Jesus reigning from heaven. The postmillennial view sees the reign of Jesus from heaven causes the gradual conversion of the whole world leading to 1,000 years of peace before Jesus returns physically. Critics love to deride this view as taking a rosy view of mankind. But postmillennialists see the conversion of the nations as a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit taking many thousands of years. By contrast, the other two views see the world growing worse, with evil gaining such power that Satan is eventually able to challenge Jesus for the throne. Rather than taking sides in this debate, let us examine the scripture, recognizing that our preconceived ideas – your and mine – will influence how we interpret it.

First, in our enthusiasm for the topic we must not throw out our principles for interpreting Revelation. Remember what they are? First, Revelation is a picture book – a series of images. It is not written with a plot line or a logical argument. The message is conveyed in these word pictures. Second, the symbols have biblical meanings. We are not free to make up any meanings of our own or import meaning from other sources. We look to the Bible for the meanings. Third, Revelation presents a heavenly perspective. It is not about social or political or military developments. It shows the spiritual reality behind earthly events. These three interpretive principles are essential to getting the message of this book.

So now when we see a 1,000 year reign of Christ, our first impulse should be to ask, what is this picture trying to show us? and what does the Bible mean by a picture of 1,000 years? There are 131 instances of 1,000 in the English Standard Version of the Bible. Many of these are a count of soldiers, sacrifices, etc. But at least 20 cannot be a literal count. Take a verse familiar to many of you, Psalm 50:10. “For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills.” So who owns the cattle on the 1001st hill? Obviously this is not intended to be a literal count of hills. Psalm 24:1 says, “The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof.” One thousand hills are symbolic for a very large number – in this case all the hills on earth. Or consider Deuteronomy 7:9. “Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations...” So what happens in the 1001st generation? Does God forget about them? And does this mean that the rapture will not come until 1,000 generations are past? And how do you count a generation, anyway? Clearly God is using 1,000 as a large number symbolic of the vastness of His love and commitment. And if you think about it, we do similar things. We talk about the \$64,000 question, and I am constantly saying to my children, “I’ve told you a million times not to exaggerate!” The more you think about it, it seems out of place to think that in a symbol book like Revelation this number should mean a count of 1,000 years. It must represent the very long time that Jesus reigns.

That brings us to the next question – what does it mean that Jesus reigns? Certainly Jesus will return in His physical body, but is that the only way He rules? Of course not. All through the Bible God is described as ruling His people and ruling the earth. Pick almost any psalm, and God’s reign is assumed. In Psalm 2, for example, God laughs at humans who think they can throw off His rule. One of the most important passages in this discussion is Matthew 28:18, where Jesus claims to have all authority now, both in heaven and on earth. But this reign of Christ does have an end point. Verse 5 says the 1,000 years will come to an end. This is not a picture of eternity. This passage also describes the saints as reigning with Christ. Putting all this together, I think the best interpretation of the millennium is that it is a symbol for the present era, and that Christ is presently ruling the earth in conjunction with His followers.

This is not the place for a detailed treatment of the Bible’s teaching about Satan, but we do have an

important indication of his role in this age. Satan is alive. He has not been destroyed yet. But his power is sharply curtailed. Satan has been chained up, like a vicious dog. I jog through our neighborhood in the morning. The first few times I did this, I was alarmed by a big dog that rushed out barking at me. But there was a fence between me and the dog, so I was safe. Now I run past that property without fear. Sometimes if I am in a happy mood I will say, "Hi doggie!" Other times I may say, "Shut up, you mutt!" Most of the time I ignore him. But if I jumped into his yard, I could get badly hurt. It would be foolish either to try to play with this dog, or to attack him. He is best left alone.

This is how it is with Satan. Most of the time you should just ignore him. Martin Luther recommended, when you are feeling oppressed by Satan, that you mock and jeer at him, because he hates not being taken seriously. Satan cannot hurt you if you leave him alone. Jesus protects you. In his first letter, John said, "...he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." (1 John 4:4) The Holy Spirit in us is greater than Satan, and He protects us. Satan should be respected for his evil influence, but he should not be feared. Jesus said, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." (Matthew 10:28) God is the only one who can send you to hell. Fear Him. But beware not to mess with Satan. Do not engage in occult activities or mess with Satan in any way. You could get hurt.

The Final Judgment

The last part of chapter 20 fast-forwards to the end of the millennium, the end of time, when Jesus returns in His human body and judges all mankind. Just before that day Satan will be released upon the earth. Satan will round up all the unbelievers and mass them together for a great battle against Jesus. It will look impressive, but it is not really. Jesus will defeat them in an instant. Then Satan will be destroyed in hell, and all people will come before God for judgment. The dead will be raised – both good and evil – which is to say that our souls will be reunited with new eternal bodies. The wicked – those who do not believe in Jesus – will be judged and cast into hell to burn forever. The righteous – those who do believe in Jesus – will enter paradise forever. And that is not the end. It is the beginning!

Following Christ

As in all our studies of Revelation, the most important thing is not that you agree with me about the millennium or any other specific vision, but that you obey Christ. And while we will never all agree on all the details of this book, the applications are much more straightforward. Last week the application was to avoid the seductive power of false religions. This week one application is to stay away from Satanic activity, but not to fear Satan – fear God. Another application is to participate in the wedding supper of the Lamb. This is the Lord's Supper which is offered in your church. I cannot emphasize too strongly the importance of joining Jesus when He invites you to the wedding feast. You would not refuse to attend your own wedding to your mate. So never allow work or sleep or vacation, or anything to keep you from the Lord's wedding feast.

But I think the most exciting lesson of this passage is the knowledge that we are the army of Christ. You might wonder about that, since 19:14 says Christ is followed by the armies of heaven, and we certainly are not in heaven yet. But that verse does not describe where we are, but our identity. In the Civil War, the Army of the Potomac did not consist of fish, but of men who fought on the northeastern front in the war. We believers no longer take our primary identity from earth, but from heaven. We live and work on earth for now, but only briefly. Soon we will be in heaven forever. Now we act as heaven's agents in this wicked world. We are the army of Jesus.

Some of you may be a bit uncomfortable with this martial language. Perhaps you think of yourself as a peaceful person, and the thought of war is distasteful. Perhaps you fear that this talk of war sounds uncomfortably similar to the jihad of the Islamic extremists. Perhaps you think that turning the other cheek

is a better metaphor for how Christians should relate to the world.

First, let me emphasize right now that spiritual war is the opposite of jihad. In jihad there is a threat of force. Sometimes people are killed for refusing to submit to Allah. Sadly, Christians have done this sometimes, too – but that is wrong. In true Christian warfare we conquer by the gospel. And if anyone dies, it is the Christian – not his potential convert. In Christian holy war we serve and love others. Indeed we turn the other cheek. We lay down our lives for others that they might come to know Jesus.

Looking again at chapter 19:11-21 we can see several additional principles of holy war. First, Jesus is leading. We do not rush off doing whatever we wish. Jesus is in charge. Second, we wear white clothes signifying purity. Holy war is not for the rash, impetuous, and immature. It is for those who have become holy by the discipline of living like Jesus. Third, our weapon is the word that comes from the mouth of Jesus. The gospel is a sharp sword. It strikes down the nations. No weapon can defend against it. We have an invincible weapon. Fourth, Jesus rules the nations. There is no such thing as a closed country. Some places may not be very receptive to the gospel now, but ultimately Jesus will open every door for evangelism. And fifth, we win! This is the guaranteed outcome of our struggle. We lose an engagement here or there. It may look as though we are losing. But the truth, the reality is that Jesus wins every battle He fights.

The application, then, is to take up arms and fight with gusto! This is a battle for everyone who believes in Jesus – young and old, rich and poor, intelligent as well as uneducated, men and women. This is a battle you can engage tonight. When you return to your room and someone says, “What’s up?” you can reply, “Jesus rules!” and see if they are willing to hear more of the gospel. Remember, although it may appear that some people are unresponsive to your efforts, Jesus always wins! Do not be deceived by appearances. Trust Jesus to use the gospel to cut down unbelief and convert the nations.

The primary application is to wage spiritual war wherever you are, but I hope there are some here who are called to go into the hottest part of the battle. I think today the fight is fiercest in two places – our slums, and Islamic countries. Most Christians do not go to these places. They are very tough, and you may not come out alive. But someone needs to go there. Is God calling you to leave everything and devote yourself to living and witnessing in an urban slum, or to spread the gospel in an Islamic country? Someone must. Someone will – for Jesus will conquer these places. Perhaps you will be the pioneer who lays down your life to open these area for the gospel – and then enters heaven to a hero’s welcome.

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