

The Wedding and the War

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[0 : 01] This is our second week in this space. You may not know it or be able to tell, but there are many people running around and scrambling and sweating and putting out fires, mostly metaphorical fires.

And I just want to take a moment to give thanks for them. Thank you. Swapping out mics, laying cable. I mean, it's amazing.

It's amazing, you know. Yeah. I could go on and on and on, but praise God for the people in this church. Growing up, many of you know my story.

I didn't really come to faith until I was about 22 years old. But I grew up in a kind of semi-Christian home. Half of the household was Christian. But my impression of Christianity growing up was basically this.

That Christianity was about getting a ticket to heaven. It was really just about getting saved. And it was a pretty clear formula. It was very transactional. You believe in Jesus, and then you get, like, the Jesus ticket.

[1 : 06] And then you just kind of hold on to that ticket. And then when you die and you get to the gates of heaven, then you present your Jesus ticket, and they let you in. And it was often presented that way. Don't you want them to let you in when you get there?

And I would say, you know, yeah. But I was, like, you know, seven, and it just seemed like a long way away. And I would, you know, sometimes ask, well, what does it mean to be a Christian now?

And really the sense was, well, you know, just be a decent, relatively conservative traditional person. And just kind of live a decent life. But then when you die, you're set, you know.

And it sounded a lot like the American vision of retirement, you know. Work hard, and then you're going to enjoy those last few years, you know. And so it was an easy thing to not think much about.

Frankly, it was so un compelling and seemed so totally irrelevant to the world that I lived in that it was very easy to walk away from that.

[2 : 03] And I did, and I really didn't look back until I was in my early 20s. And now that I have begun to read and to study Scripture, I've realized that so much of what I thought as a child Christianity was about has nothing to do with it.

And, in fact, it's interesting. I think that there are many people today who grew up with that sense of what Christianity is about, who have since walked away, who never had an opportunity to realize that that has very little to do with the faith of Scripture, the faith of Jesus Christ, the faith that's been revealed to the world.

And so when we've been looking at this book called Revelation, the last book in the Bible, Revelation just blasts that whole idea of Christianity apart. And it uses these rich images, most of them drawn straight from the Old Testament, to expand our imaginations, to help us begin to grasp what God is actually doing in the world.

And so this week we're looking at Revelation 19. And Revelation 19 gives us two images that describe for us Christian salvation and life.

And they don't seem to fit together at all. When you look at the whole chapter, Revelation 19, the first half of the chapter, we see all of the saints of God gathering together with Jesus, who is a bridegroom.

[3 : 29] And it's a great wedding feast. And you say, well, that's a wonderful image of the Christian life. But the chapter doesn't end at verse 10. It keeps going. And all of a sudden, with no break at all, we get a different image.

The scene shifts. And we see a very different reality. We see the saints gathering not around a wedding feast, but they're preparing for war.

And they're preparing to charge into battle behind Jesus, the warrior. And at first, both of these images seem totally incompatible. A wedding and a war.

And yet what we're going to see is they actually are meant to be held together. They actually need each other. The Christian life is both a wedding and a war. It is both feasting and fighting.

And so that's what we're going to look at. The Christian life is feasting, and the Christian life is fighting. And then we're going to look at what that means. Now, it sounds like I'm talking about Vikings or something, but hang with me. And we're going to unpack that it's not the kind of feasting we normally think of, and it's definitely not the kind of fighting that we normally think of.

[4 : 35] Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. And we thank you that we can come to your word with openness and excitement and interest.

Or we can come to your word so distracted and so pulled in so many directions that we can barely focus. That we can come with an attitude of trust and openness and ready to receive.

Or we can come with an enormous amount of skepticism. But at the end of the day, all of this depends on your ability and power and willingness to speak. And that you can speak.

And that you do speak. And so we pray that you would speak to us this morning through your word. And that we would come face to face with your living word, Jesus Christ. It's in his name that we pray. Amen.

Amen. So first of all, the Christian life is about feasting. A kind of feasting. You know if you've been with us in the study of Revelation that we have just seen in chapter 18 God's judgment fall on Babylon.

[5 : 37] And Babylon represents all of the world and all of life apart from God. All that which lives in rebellion against God. The judgment has come on that way of life, that way of being.

And now all the heavens break out in song. And there's this song of praise. And beginning in verse 6 it says, Alleluia, for the Lord our God, the Almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and exult and give him glory. For the marriage of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready. And we recognize that this is not just a feast.

It's a wedding celebration. And this is, I think, the most striking thing about this image. That God's people are like a bride to God.

They are like his bride. And he is the bridegroom. And you see all through the Bible, this is not a new idea that just springs out of John's imagination as he's writing these words.

[6 : 38] It actually is deeply rooted all throughout Scripture. Places like Isaiah 62 or Ezekiel 16. God talks about himself as the bridegroom of his people.

And what I want you to see is how utterly unique that is. You know, people say, well, all religions are the same. Well, I don't think you're going to see this in any other religion. No religion other than Christianity would have the audacity to say that God sees his people like his spouse.

Master, servant, you know, king, subjects, even father, children. You might find that other places. But the kind of intimacy and vulnerability and openness, the mutual indwelling, the delight that one spouse has in the other.

That's unique to Christianity. The idea that God would see his people that way is mind-blowing. And what this begins to show us right away is that the Christian life is not just about getting a ticket to heaven.

It's about having a relationship with God that is a lot like a marriage with all of the intimacy and the joy and the vulnerability. Not just God fully knowing and loving us, but that we would be invited to fully know and fully love God.

[7 : 54] It's amazing. And, you know, I heard a preacher put it like this one time. Imagine that you're married.

And imagine your spouse goes out and spends the day hanging out with another person, sharing their hopes and fears and dreams and talking about life with other people.

Goes out on dates at night with other people. Maybe even shares their bed with other people. And imagine they go and do that for a while and then they come back home and you're waiting for them.

And when they walk in the door, you confront them and say, what are you doing? And imagine they say, what's the big deal? I mean, we got married.

We're still married. I got this ring on my finger. We still share a bank account. We still have the same last name. What more do you want? And what would you say?

[8 : 58] I want your heart. I want you to look at me like you used to. I want you to delight in me. I don't want you to just check the boxes.

I want your affection. Why are you giving it away, right? And in a similar kind of way, I think there are a lot of people who if you ask them on a census report, what's your religion?

They would say, well, I'm a Christian. And if you ask them about that, they'd say, well, yeah, yeah, I mean, I prayed the prayer, believe in Jesus. You know, I got baptized.

You know, I go to church whenever I can. I travel a lot. My job's crazy. But I go to church when I can. You know, what more does God want from me? God wants your heart. He wants your affection.

God wants us to love and delight in him as much as he already loves and delights in us, even as we sit here. He wants our devotion because it's about a marriage.

[10 : 02] It's not just subjects following out of fear. We're the bride of Christ. So this is a very powerful image. You know, God wants our full heart, our full affection.

And so the Christian life is partly about that. It's partly about feasting on the presence of God. It's about going, as C.S. Lewis loved to say, further up and further in.

It's about learning how to delight in and experience the love and the joy and the affection of God in our daily lives. That's a huge piece of what it means to be a Christian. But it doesn't stop there.

As I said, you know, as many places in the Bible do, Revelation marches relentlessly on into a very different kind of image. We have this wedding feast and then all the heavens are opened and John sees this magnificent vision where the bridegroom is reintroduced to us as a warrior on a war horse.

And all of the saints are no longer feasting. They're armed for battle. But instead of armor, they're wearing white linen. And we see that the Christian life is not just about feasting, but it's also about joining in the fight.

[11 : 18] And the thing that we need to see right away is that this is not a typical military battle. A lot of people over the years who are more or less biblically illiterate have taken passages like this and used it to justify all kinds of military action.

That's not what we're talking about here. It's a very different kind of battle, a couple of very key differences. Number one, this is not a military battle. This is a spiritual war. It's a spiritual war.

Revelation uses images like this all throughout to show us spiritual realities. Right? That's what apocalyptic literature is. That means that we are pulling back the veil.

And we're getting a window into the deeper spiritual dynamics that drive this world. So we're pulling back the veil and we're seeing there's a war going on. And we have the true enemies being depicted again and again and again.

And the dragon and the two beasts that were created in the image of the dragon. And then all of their followers. All that stands opposed to God in the world.

[12 : 26] And as Paul says in Ephesians 6.12, very well-known passage. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness.

Against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. You know, some people hear that and they think that's just, that's such superstition. You know, does anybody actually believe that anymore?

Or, and then you read the news about a shooting in Dayton. You know, or El Paso. You know, one racially motivated. One seemingly almost sort of demonically motivated.

And you look at something like that. Somebody's mowing people down. Brutal, brutal murder. And you say, you really think that gun control is going to solve this? I mean, it may help a whole lot.

But do you think that that's really where the problem is sourced? Right? Do you think if we figure out how to reach out to young white men a little more, identify the kind of warning signs? Yeah, maybe we can cut down on it.

[13 : 30] But no reasonable person can read about something like that or experience that. And not at least question whether or not there is true evil in the world. And what Revelation shows us is, you pull back the veil and it's not just about sociology.

It's not just about legislation. There are dark forces of evil at work in the world. So it's a spiritual war that we're seeing.

And number two, the way this fighting is different than most of what we might think, is that because it's a spiritual war, it uses spiritual weapons. You know, this is not a war that's fought with swords or guns or bombs.

It says in verse 15, from his mouth comes a sharp sword. And of course, that's not talking about a real sword. It's a metaphor that the Bible uses, especially in Revelation, to talk about the word of God.

From his mouth, he wields the word like a sword. It's the only weapon he uses. And you say, well, he just talks? Is that what you're saying?

[14 : 31] And well, and then we read the Gospels and we see the effects of this sword when Jesus wields it. Right? Jesus gives sight to the blind. Jesus heals leprosy.

Jesus makes the lame walk. Jesus raises the dead. And more miraculous than anything, he declares God's forgiveness for sin. And in all of these things, what we need to see is he is wielding his word like a sword.

That's what happened when Jesus uses his word. It's not just talk like it is with human beings. The world changes when Jesus speaks. Captives are liberated.

Right? Death is overcome. Those in bondage are set free. Those in oppression are lifted up. This is the impact of God's word wielded by Jesus.

And in all these ways, Jesus is fighting the battle. Right? He's waging war against the enemy. He is reclaiming territory. He's liberating captives.

[15 : 29] He's driving back the darkness and the chaos. And so this is an image not just for us to reflect on, but we can't miss the fact that the saints are there with him.

They're not just feasting at the table. They're fighting at his side. To his right and to his left. They're following him into battle. Well, this, my friends, is what salvation is for. You don't just put the ticket in your back pocket, live a decent life, and wait to die.

Wait for retirement to come. There's a war going on. The safest place in this world is on the battlefield.

You want to know why? Because that's where Jesus is. If you think you can sit on the sidelines and watch, you're in terrible, terrible danger.

Jesus is in the fight. We're called to go fight alongside him. And so this means speaking God's word into the darkness and the chaos and the confusion of this world with boldness.

[16 : 38] It also means liberating captives. It means freeing the oppressed. It means fighting against injustice and racism. It means caring for the poor.

It means giving food to the hungry. In all of these ways, we push back the darkness. Right? So all of the ministries of this church are engaged in this battle.

Right? When we preach and teach and live out God's word in our lives, we are pushing back the darkness. Those of you, the many of you who provide safe homes for children who need foster care.

For those of you who work to support families that are trying to rebuild themselves and be made whole again so that those kids can go back to their moms and dads. You're pushing back the darkness.

For those of you who work in caring for resettled refugees and making sure that they have what they need and they're adjusting to life here. You are pushing back the darkness. Right?

[17 : 36] Those of you who work and go and do the work of international development in the developing world. You are pushing back the darkness. But it doesn't just have to be these major endeavors.

Although those are amazing. Right? The simple acts of Christian faithfulness. You know, choosing to forgive somebody. Instead of harboring resentment.

Right? Choosing to show hospitality. Especially to somebody who may not be like you. Somebody you wouldn't normally interact with. Choosing to be generous. Choosing to show kindness.

Darkness. You know, all of these are ways that we push back the darkness. And don't let anyone tell you, even your own voice, that, oh, it's not that big a deal. Oh, we just had some people over for dinner.

It's not that big a deal. Don't let anybody tell you that. We've pulled back the veil. We've seen the reality of what's actually going on. And you're in the fight when you're doing that.

[18 : 34] So these two images, I think, show us what the Christian life is all about. It's a life of feasting. It's a life of fighting. Or you might rephrase it this way.

It's a life of contemplation. And a life of activism. Right? Or you might put it this way. It's a life of intimacy. And it's a life of engagement.

Right? It's both and. And they need each other. We need both. And we need to come back to this from time to time. Because I do think that some of us, we love to worship. And we love to study scripture.

And we love to learn theology. We love to muse about all of the various, you know, sort of debates throughout church history. We love to reflect on the lives of the saints.

We love to, you know, some of us, the real geeky ones, love to read the church fathers and to see what they were saying about things. And all of that is well and good. But if you're not in the fight, if you're not out there in the fight, then you're missing out.

[19 : 37] You've forgotten what all this is for. And I believe Jesus is in the fight. And that's where we need to be. We're neglecting the role that God has given us.

And we've misunderstood the purpose of the gifts that we have. And what will happen over time if you're only focusing on that personal relationship with God, but you're not really thinking about what this means for the world, your faith will become stagnant.

And it will become abstract and disconnected from reality. Right? That phrase, you know, so heavenly minded that you're no earthly good. Right? You sort of drift into the ether of Christian speculation.

On the other hand, I think we have a lot of people in our church who tend more to be on the other side, to be activists. Right? So, you know, it's all well and good to preach. I know theology matters for, you know, for you guys.

And I know I should be reading the Bible, but what it's really about is being engaged. And there are a lot of real problems in the world. And Christians would do well just to kind of get over all of their debates and all of their disagreements.

[20 : 43] None of that really matters. God just wants us to love our neighbors. We just need to get out there. We need to end all forms of injustice. Right? And so a lot of people just say, well, just, okay, that's good. But we just need to be out here fighting.

And we need to change the world. And a lot of people come to D.C. because we want to change the world. We want to do it right now. But if you have not given your heart to God, if you've checked the boxes and you're kind of checking in every now and then, but most of the time you're out there.

If you're not anchored by and nourished by God's word. If you're not having times where you are delighting simply in who God is for his own sake.

If you're not spending time in quiet solitude, remembering how to listen, you know, I often have to remember that the main thing I need to do as a pastor is to shut up and listen.

I need to listen to God. And if we're not doing that, then over time you become rootless. And you're not going to have what you need to fight a spiritual fight.

[21 : 53] You can fight a fight in the legislature. You know, you can fight a sociological fight. You can fight a financial fight. But you're not going to have the resources you need to fight a spiritual fight.

You're going to be seriously outgunned. The good news is that Jesus has given us a way to hold both together, the feasting and the fighting. This is a way to experience intimacy and nourishment from God so that we can go out and have the strength to fight.

And this is the meal that we call the Eucharist that we share every week. We heard in Luke 22, Jesus desires to have one final feast with his disciples before what?

He goes into the ultimate fight. Right? Where he wins the decisive victory on the cross. Which means as hopeless as it may be in our fight, we know the victory is already secure.

And he institutes this meal and says, I'm going to go into the fight. One day you're going to be there with me. I want you to have this meal. And I want you to share this meal because this will nourish you and give you the intimacy that you need to go out there and fight the good fight.

[23 : 04] At my side. And so, you know, this is a way of thinking about the Eucharist is, it's like the rehearsal dinner before the wedding supper of the Lamb. Right?

So every time you're invited to come down the aisle, you are like the bride of Christ coming down to meet the groom. And so we are enacting and reenacting and reenacting this feast that will one day come.

And the feast prepares us for the fight outside. And every aspect of this feast is radically countercultural. Radically countercultural. And I'll just give you a few examples.

In an individualistic culture, it shows us that we need each other. Because we all come together. And we all eat together.

This is why we don't do private communion. It's a meal meant to be shared by everyone. And so we eat together reminding us that it's not good for any human being to be alone. Right? In a divided culture, deeply divided culture, it reminds us that we're all in one in Christ.

[24 : 12] Because we eat the same bread and we drink the same wine. In a culture of celebrity and self-promotion, it's profoundly humbling.

Because nobody's entitled to eat at this table. We're only able to come because God's eternal nature is to have mercy. Right? In a culture of workaholicism, it reminds us that human beings need Sabbath rest.

We were made for Sabbath rest and worship. In a culture of ambition and careerism, it reminds us of the purpose of all human vocation.

You know, when you bring the offering down the aisle when the bread and the wine and the money that you give comes down the aisle, that is the fruit of vocation. That is the church saying, here's what all this was for.

For your glory, Lord. Purpose of all human vocation. We're going to go more into that in a couple of weeks. Right? In a culture of insiders and outsiders, it's a picture of true hospitality.

[25 : 18] Right? Because this meal and the people we share it with, we have no say in that matter. The people who come to this table are not the people that we might have invited. They're the people that Jesus Christ has invited.

It says in verse 9, Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb. You don't get to choose your family. God chooses it. And praise the Lord for that.

In an outrage culture, this meal calls us to forgive and to be reconciled to one another before we eat. What that means is that every week we are re-knitting the social fabric of our society bit by bit, thread by thread, relationship by relationship.

And perhaps the most challenging thing of all, I think, for people in D.C. is this meal reminds us of our fundamental inadequacy.

It reminds us that we are not enough. I think maybe one of the most significant liturgical acts that we do together as a church is this. When you come to receive the bread, you hold out your hands like this.

[26 : 29] You're saying to God, with all of my education, all of my credentials, all of my intelligence, all of my competency, I've realized it's not enough.

I can't fix this world. I can't even fix myself. I can't fix my marriage. I need you to give me what I don't have.

I need you to be God in a way that I can't be God. I need you to nourish me and fill up parts of me that I cannot fill. I need you to answer and solve questions and problems and address brokenness that I simply can't handle.

I'm not enough. I need you to be God. I'm not God. And I've realized that. When we hold out our hands like this, this is what we're saying to God.

And you know what God says in response? He doesn't give us answers. He doesn't give us explanations or justifications. He gives us the life of his son. And he says, this is what you really need.

[27 : 30] And you can have as much as you want. Come and eat. So in this meal, we are nourished by the life of Christ.

And then guess what? At the end of our time together, there's the dismissal. That's the call to arms. That's the reminder that we're not just going to go out and have lunch, although that's a nice thing to do after a service.

But we're going out there to join in the fight. To join in the fight. To push back the darkness and the confusion and the chaos and the injustice that has torn this world apart.

By proclaiming and by living out and being the presence of Christ in the world. And Christianity holds these two things together and reminds us that this just isn't about getting a ticket to heaven.

We're actually building a new society. What you might call a new creation society. What you might call a Eucharistic society. A truer, better way of being human together.

[28 : 36] We are the bride making herself ready for the wedding feast of the new creation. And so every week when we gather, as we will in a little while, we will share this meal that reminds us who we are and why we're here.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you for this meal. Lord, in a little while when we confess, Lord, you may have stirred up all kinds of things in our hearts.

Lord, I pray that this would be a time of powerful experience of your presence. That you and only you would minister to your people. And that when we hold out our hands, with whatever sense of need we have, Lord, that you would respond with the grace that you've always responded in.

That you would give us your life, give us your son, give us your love. And remind us that we're sons and daughters of the kingdom. We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen.