

After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting:

“Hallelujah!

*Salvation and glory and power belong to our God,
2 for true and just are his judgments.*

*He has condemned the great prostitute
who corrupted the earth by her adulteries.
He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.”*

3 And again they shouted:

“Hallelujah!

The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever.”

4 The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God, who was seated on the throne. And they cried:

“Amen, Hallelujah!”

5 Then a voice came from the throne, saying:

*“Praise our God,
all you his servants,
you who fear him,
both small and great!”*

6 Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting:

“Hallelujah!

For our Lord God Almighty reigns.

*7 Let us rejoice and be glad
and give him glory!*

*For the wedding of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready.*

*8 Fine linen, bright and clean,
was given her to wear.”*

(Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)

9 Then the angel said to me, “Write: ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’ ” And he added, “These are the true words of God.” (Revelation 19:1-9)

We Will Win!

Have you noticed that victory celebrations are gone from the wars of our lifetime? When the Japanese surrendered at the end of World War II, the whole country celebrated – most of us have seen that iconic picture of the sailor kissing the nurse in Times Square. But that was pretty much the last victory celebration in the U.S. When the first Gulf War ended, people did not spill out into the streets to celebrate. When the Vietnam War ended, when the Korean War ended, there was no explosion of joy. When President Obama announced that he was bringing the troops home from Iraq and later from Afghanistan, the country didn’t stop for a spontaneous celebration. Why not? Well, those last two wars aren’t over until the troops actually come home. But looking at all the wars we’ve fought since World War II, it hasn’t felt like we’ve had a clear victory in many of them. Now, I’m not taking anything away from the men and women who fought and died in those wars. But it’s hard to feel like our whole nation fully engaged in those wars or like we’ve defeated the enemy. And it’s hard to imagine the outpouring of emotion today for a victory celebration that the oldest members of our congregation remember from the end of World War II. But this morning, God asks us to imagine an even greater outpouring of emotion. The reading from the book of Revelation that we have before us this morning is a picture of the ultimate victory celebration, the celebration of the people of God on Judgment Day. It’s our celebration. My friends, **we will win!**

The book of Revelation records a vision the Apostle John saw near the end of his life. God showed him the future of the Christian Church. Much of that future is dark. But the final chapters show the dawn that comes after the darkness. In his vision, John hears **“what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting.”** That sound was **“like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder.”** What is all that noise? It’s the celebration of the Church, the gathering of all believers in Christ, who sing three great songs about the victory we will win on Judgment Day.

Why does this victory mean so much? Because it’s been a long, hard war. That war has dragged on for two thousand years already – and it’s still going on today. God knows what we face down here. He knows how hard it is for us to see the end of the war we have to fight every day, so he shows us Christ’s victory over the enemies of his Church. The first song says that God **“has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.”** History is full of the examples of God’s enemies shedding the blood of his people. Even if we don’t die, we still suffer loss and hardship in this battle here.

Who are the enemies? Several chapters before this, God showed John a prostitute. Her name was Babylon the Great. That’s the enemy that God has condemned and punished. Who does she represent? You might be surprised to learn that this prostitute does not represent all those people out there who lead sinful lives. The world is full of prostitutes. Our society is full of people who engage in casual sex and homosexual behavior. But they are not specifically the great prostitute. Then who is? The prostitute represents those who claim to be a part of Jesus’ church, but who are unfaithful to his teaching. She represents those churches that attack and try to destroy the gospel.

Some churches deny the gospel by teaching that in some way, you have to work your way to heaven. Now, even in a church that teaches false doctrine, the Holy Spirit works through the gospel and he brings people to faith in Christ. But any visible church whose teaching destroys the gospel is the enemy of the true Church, the invisible gathering of all those who believe in Christ. That institution is the enemy even of the believers who belong to it. That’s true even if those believers don’t realize it.

The Roman Catholic Church for all practical purposes teaches that Christ did his part and now you have to do your part by coming to mass, by observing the requirements of their seven sacraments and by doing the works the priest requires, especially when you do penance. It teaches that God gets the work going, but then it’s up to you to keep it going. That’s not the gospel. But they aren’t alone in teaching Christians to rely on works. Many of the most conservative of churches in America today teach that for you to be saved, you have to make a decision. You have to invite Christ into your heart and make him your Lord. And if you think that’s not such a big deal, I can tell you from personal experience that when there’s any doubt about your faith, they don’t point you back to what Jesus did on the cross. They point back to your conversion experience. Did you have a great crisis? Did you reach the point of desperation and then did you invite Christ into your heart? That’s not the gospel. That’s depending on us instead of on Jesus. Of course, today, liberal churches have dumped the gospel for social causes. In the sixties, it was the civil rights movement. In the seventies and eighties it was women’s rights, even to the point where they fought to keep abortion legal. Today, it’s homosexuality. These churches twist Jesus’ words into a demand that we accept and defend the “right” of people to live in sin.

All those false versions of Christianity are the great prostitute. They wage war against the true Church – not the WELS, but the gathering of all who trust in Jesus. You don’t have to look very hard to find any of those groups condemning churches like ours that depend solely on what Jesus has done. And sadly, as the song indicates, those forces within the church ally with forces outside the church to attack the pure gospel. That’s where the blood of the saints comes in. Many Christian people have died at the hands of people who claimed to be Christians. Maybe that doesn’t happen much today, but the alliance is still in place. Today, forces outside the church and inside the church want to change the way our society and our churches thinks of abortion and homosexuality and marriage and divorce. They are allies fighting for the same thing.

We are at war. And it’s often a difficult and painful experience. Many of us have been confronted by friends and family members who don’t understand our convictions and who have attacked us for them. Many of us have struggled to make our beliefs clear to friends and even potential spouses. Often, we can’t help but fear what it will cost us to stand on the truth.

But that war won't last forever. Every day, we get closer to victory. It doesn't always feel that way. But soon we will triumph over all the enemies of the gospel. That's what this picture shows us. It shows us victory over false churches that no longer stand on the truth. It shows victory over forces outside the church that try to destroy our faith. What is the victory? Christ returning. He won the victory when he died and rose. He paid for all of our sins. He set us free from death and hell and even from the hardships of this world. When he comes back, the freedom will be ours. When Jesus returns, all the enemies of the Church will be swept into hell. No one will ever listen to them again. All the forces that have so much power and so much ability to make our lives hard right now will be broken. And they will never bother us again. All the sin in our lives and hearts, all the fear and guilt and weakness that makes it hard for us to stand up to them will be cleaned out and we will be made perfect in our faith. And our world will be remade and we will live with Christ forever. That's worth a song on Judgment Day. **We will win! We will triumph over the enemies of the Church!**

II.

That's a victory we all want to see. The older we get and the more we see of the power of sin in this world, the more we look forward to the return of Christ. That's why the Church sings in our text for today. But what are they celebrating? The church roars like thunder because her enemies are destroyed. In the second song, they sing, "**Hallelujah! The smoke from her [the prostitute] goes up for ever and ever.**" What's that a picture of? It's hell. The smoke goes up forever and ever because the fires of hell never go out and when God sends people to hell, they suffer those fires for all eternity. We are going to celebrate that.

Does that bother you? It does bother some Christians. Some scholars argue that sending people to hell would be unworthy of God. You and I probably struggle more with the fact that people we know – maybe even people we love – will be in hell. But that's because we're still here. In this world, our hearts are always caught between love of people and things we know here and the love of God. Quite often, those loves are in conflict. When we reach eternal life, it will be different. We will no longer have a conflict in our hearts. We will be free from the influence and the confusion that comes from living in a sinful world. We will be glad that God has avenged the blood of the saints, as the song says. We will celebrate what God has done for all eternity. And in this section, a voice from the throne of God calls us, all his servants, both great and small, to praise the Lord. God wants us to understand that his judgments are right and just. No matter how hard that is for us to see right now, when Christ comes back, we will understand and celebrate.

While we live in this sinful world, with sin in our own hearts, the only way for us to trust that all he does is good and right is by remembering how God won our victory. He didn't have Jesus lead an army of angels into this world at Bethlehem. He didn't have him overthrow the priests and scribes who had led his people astray. He didn't give us an army that can march across the globe and enforce Christianity. When Jesus came to win eternal life for us, he was born in a stable. His parents were nobodies. Jesus lived his whole life on the margin of society. It was hard for the important people in Israel to see him as the son of God. Even his own disciples didn't fully understand who he was and what he came to do until after he rose from the dead.

But the humble life wasn't the worst of it. The Son of God took our place. To put it in modern terms, he went into death row of the worst prison on earth and he replaced the criminals there. He suffered their punishment – he even died for them. Then he rose and opened the gates so those prisoners can walk out free. You and I are those worst prisoners ever. All the things that we struggle with show the sin and weakness of our hearts. We can't see what God is doing. We distrust his plan and want something different because we're sinners. All sinners deserve death and hell. But Jesus came to take our place. He died and he rose and he set us free. From the beginning of time, he promised to do that. From the Garden of Eden, the devil has done all in his power to keep us from hearing and believing that message. He's even corrupted churches and pastors and led them to oppose the truth. He's rallied governments and societies and all their opinions and prejudices to condemn us and pressure us to change. But the gospel is the power of God. It has triumphed in our hearts. It has made us Christ's own people.

When Jesus returns we will celebrate our victory. Many times in the Bible, God calls that final celebration a wedding feast. You can see why: weddings are some of the happiest things we do in this life. Our wedding reception is often the biggest and most expensive party we'll ever throw. We rejoice in being generous to our guests. When Jesus comes back, he's going to bring us into his wedding reception, the biggest celebration God will ever throw. He will be generous to us forever. **We will win! We will celebrate with Christ forever.**

Look forward to that celebration. We're in the last few weeks of the church year, in a short season called End Times. During this season, I like to use the same hymn to close each service. It's "When Your Glory I Shall See." In that hymn, you and I speak as the bride of Christ. The wedding celebration of Christ is the celebration of love for his Church, his love for us. We will enjoy that love forever. Remember that when we sing that hymn again this morning. Remember it for the rest of your life. No matter how hard the battle gets, we will win. Christ will come for us. Amen.