

Handel's *Messiah* features the masterpiece that we have come to know as the *Hallelujah Chorus*. Its opening lines are one of the most recognizable pieces of music in the world nearly three centuries later. Many music historians consider it "one of Western culture's most spectacular achievements."ⁱ

Amazingly, Handel composed *Messiah* at a time of deep despondency in his life. He had experienced many failures, had failing health, was deeply in debt, and on the verge of bankruptcy. *Messiah* was written in only a span of twenty-four days. The composer would close himself in his room for hours at a time. In September of 1741, Handel's assistant called to him repeatedly but received no reply. Finally, he went to check on the composer, and found him disheveled and teary-eyed. He had just finished *Hallelujah*. Handel told his friend, "I did think I did see all heaven before me and the great God himself."

When *Messiah* was first performed in London on March 22, 1743, the *Hallelujah* was so moving that the King and everyone in attendance spontaneously rose to their feet and remained standing until the end. This tradition of standing for the *Hallelujah Chorus* continues today. Demand for tickets was so high that advertisements asked women not to wear hoops in their dresses and men to leave their swords at home to accommodate more patrons.ⁱⁱ

Handel based *Hallelujah* in large part on Revelation 19, and Revelation 19 is the original *Hallelujah Chorus*. In chapter 19, we find ourselves in the throne room of heaven. Let me set the scene for you.

In Revelation 18, we see the judgment of the great whore of Babylon. Most modern translations use the more polite term *prostitute*. However, the original Greek is more crude and raw than that. She is the whore of Babylon. Babylon is a figure for the worldly power structures that oppress and persecute the people of God and ensnare the people of the world in their grip. The whore of Babylon was Rome. The whore of Babylon was Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and Red China. The whore of Babylon is the Islamic net cast over the Middle East and the false religions that grip the Far East. And the whore of Babylon is also the aggressively secular oligarchies we are fashioning in the West. The whore of Babylon is any worldly economic system, power structure, or means of religious control that ensnares and enslaves the people of earth and oppress the people of God.

Then, in the second half of Revelation 18, we hear the laments of those who had sold their souls to buy what the Whore of Babylon was selling. They can no longer indulge themselves in her unrestrained hedonistic perversions and wanton greed. Babylon has fallen and their own judgment awaits. Then, in verse 20, a voice from heaven calls on the people of God to rejoice over the judgment of Babylon.

In chapter 19, that is exactly what they do along with all the creatures of heaven. The first half of the chapter consists of a series of four “Hallelujahs” from the great multitude of God’s people in heaven from every nation, tribe, people and language, and from all the creatures of heaven. *Hallelujah* simply means “praise the Lord!” Revelation 19 is the only chapter in all of the New Testament that contains this declaration of praise. It is found frequently in the Psalms, but most Bible versions translate the word there as “Praise the Lord!” So, in many of our English translations, this is the only place in the Bible where the word Hallelujah is found. These hallelujahs extol God’s glory and exult in His triumph over the whore of Babylon.

Babylon’s judgment means the salvation of God’s people. Ultimately, God saves us by judging the sinful world. This clears the decks, if you will, for a new heavens and a new earth. It makes it possible for God to finally be brought together with His People. God and His creation are no longer separated by time and space, but they are made one. Verses 6 through 8 portray this as a marriage. It is time for the bride and the bridegroom, Christ and his beloved church, to come together.

The Marriage of the Lamb (6-8)

⁶ 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.*

This hallelujah comes from ***what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude***. We first see this great multitude in Revelation 7. They are the saints in heaven “*from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages (7:9).*” There they cry out in a “*loud voice (7:10).*” Revelation 19 adds a new twist. Now the great multitude sounds like ***the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder***. This is significant, because these voices appear earlier in Revelation, but they are not the voices of God’s people. It is Jesus who spoke with the voice of many waters (1:15). It is God the Father who speaks with peals of thunder.

However this neither Jesus nor God talking, for it is a plural voice calling itself to worship God, ***Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory***. This is the same multitude as before. This is still the voice of the saints in heaven, but now that Babylon has been judged, the righteous have been vindicated, and the kingdom is now fully established, their voice sounds different. God’s people sound like Jesus. The church in heaven speaks with his voice. John promises us in 1 John 3:2-3 that *when Christ appears we shall be like him*. This just paints a picture of that amazing promise.

This highlights the fact that we are brothers and sisters of Christ. We will share in His kingdom and we will reign with Him in eternity, so as saints in heaven we will speak with His voice of authority. It is no longer the worldly power structures who have authority. It is Jesus, Our Savior and Lord, and all His people. As Jesus said in Matthew 28:18, *All authority on heaven and earth have been given to me*, and now He is sharing it with His people.

We will not fully sound like Jesus until we are joined with Him at His return, but it is fitting to ask, when people hear you speak, whose voice do they hear? Who do you sound like? Whose voice does Marshfield hear coming from this people, this body, this congregation? Do we speak with the voice of Jesus? Whose words do your neighbors hear coming from you? You spouse, your children? Your parents? Your friends, your coworkers? Your boss? Your employees? Whose voice do they hear?

In the exultation of this hallelujah, the rejoicing shifts from jubilation over the fall of Babylon, to a celebration of the establishment of Christ’s kingdom— ***for the Lord our God the***

Almighty reigns. The Greek grammar in this verse should be rendered “has begun to reign.”ⁱⁱⁱ The saints are celebrating the full and final consummation of the kingdom. In this case, it is pictured as the ***marriage of the Lamb***, and its associated **marriage supper of the Lamb**.

In the First Century, a bride and groom were first betrothed for up to twelve months. However, they were considered legally married at that point, and a divorce was required to separate. The only difference was that bride and groom were not to live together or have sexual relations until the actual wedding.

When the time came for the wedding, the bride, dressed in a fine dress and jewels, would leave her father’s house and meet the groom at the groom’s house or a predetermined location, where a procession of family and friends would then lead back to the groom’s house.^{iv} This began a period of feasting and celebration that could last up to seven days. Think back to Jesus’ first miracle of changing water to wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. It was a big party. This is what was going on there. This was the marriage supper. After the marriage supper, the wedding procession would usher the couple into the bridal chamber to the bed, where the marriage would be fully and finally consummated.^v

This scene of Revelation 19 is one where the wedding party has arrived at the groom’s home, and it is time for the great wedding feast. All of this imagery is emblematic of the intimate spiritual connection we will have with our Savior where we will know fully and be fully known (1 Cor. 13:12).

The marriage imagery used to describe God’s relationship with his people is deeply rooted in scripture. In the Old Testament, Israel was God’s bride, but instead of being a beautiful, faithful bride, she is pictured by the prophets as an oversexed, promiscuous whore who actually paid her Johns instead of receiving payment (Jer. 3; Ezek. 16, 23; Hosea). Despite Israel’s unfaithfulness, God promises to restore his bride and again love her as a pure and beautiful bride.

We see the beginning of the fulfillment of those promises in the New Testament through Christ’s relationship with His church. Christ is portrayed as the bridegroom betrothed to his bride ready to receive her as his beautiful, radiant bride (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:22-33; Col. 3:18-19). Paul blurs the lines between the relationship of a husband and wife and Christ and his

church so much they almost become identical. But Christ and His church are betrothed, but the marriage is not yet consummated. We haven't gotten to the wedding feast, the marriage supper.

In Revelation 19, that grand moment has finally arrived. The bridegroom is returning for his bride. She has been faithful and she ***has made herself ready*** for Him. She is dressed in ***fine linen, bright and pure***. I told you last week that clothing in Revelation signifies morals and lifestyle. We are told that quite clearly here. The bride's pure, bright, wedding gown symbolizes ***the righteous deeds of the saints***.

This doesn't mean we have earned our own place at the marriage supper. Look at verse 8. Where did she get this fine linen? It was ***granted her***. It was given to her. This was by the grace and provision of God, not by our own effort (Eph. 2:4-10). God in his grace grants us righteousness to put on, but we must still respond by putting it on. The gift can be refused, and if so, According to Revelation 3:4-6, we will find ourselves amongst those wearing soiled garments when he returns and have our names blotted out of the book of life.

The Marriage Supper of the Lamb (9-10)

John is then told to write the fourth of Revelation's four beatitudes, ***Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb***.

What we see here is a bit of a mixed metaphor. In the preceding verses God's people were the bride, but here, we are the wedding guests invited to the marriage supper. It's a reminder that we shouldn't interpret Revelation's many symbols in some wooden, overly literal way. There are several places in Revelation where the symbols shift or are used for more than one thing. In chapter 17, we see a beast with seven heads, and later we are told that these seven heads represent seven mountains and then seven kings. God's people, or the saints of chapter 19 are both the bride who will marry the Lamb, and the wedding guests invited to the marriage supper.

There is no need trip over this. It is simply trying to describe the indescribable. John is painting pictures of four-dimensional heavenly realities on a two-dimensional canvas. He has to paint the pictures in a way that transcends the bounds of earthly logic to communicate eternal truth. So, from this perspective, it makes perfect sense for us to be both beautiful bride and

honored guest. We are chosen and invited, beloved and summoned. It's also possible the bride imagery pictures the church as a whole, whereas the marriage supper is about your individual salvation.

The tragedy is this, initially, all of humanity has been invited to the great wedding banquet, but most refused the invitation. This was the whole point of Jesus' parable of the wedding feast in Matthew 22 and Luke 14. Jesus tells this story of a great king who prepared a great wedding banquet for his son. He sent out his servants to all those invited to come. But they refused. They were busy. They made excuses.

But the fattened cattle have already been butchered. There's ribeyes and filet mignon. Everything's ready. There's a string quartet, and ice sculpture, and a chocolate bar. It's time for the wedding. The groom is in his tuxedo, the bride in her beautiful white dress. So the king sends his servants back out to find anyone to come to the wedding they can.

The guest list is quite surprising. It is filled with the "*poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame* (Lk. 14:21)." It's a wretched lot of wedding guests really. This is where the blessing of being invited to the marriage supper of the lamb comes in. This pitiful cast of characters that fill the king's banquet hall are transformed from their former sorry state into the splendid, beautiful bride chosen and loved by the Lamb. It didn't matter that they didn't have their own fine linen to wear to the party. Got granted it to them. He made them pure and beautiful through the blood of the Lamb.

It doesn't matter what ugliness lies in your past. It doesn't matter what ugly thing you did, or what ugly things you have said. It doesn't matter what ugly things have been done to you. You may have grown up in an ugly home or an ugly situation. You may have made some ugly choices or made an ugly mess of your life. But God will transform all of that into something beautiful and majestic and glorious.

He will grant to you a splendid righteousness you could never have on your own. All you have to do is put it on. You have been invited to the marriage supper of the lamb. Will you come?

ⁱ Haskins, Robert (1990, December 21) 'Messiah': Great Performance by Symphony and Chorus. *The Baltimore Sun*. Retrieved from http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1990-12-21/entertainment/1990355121_1_symphony-chorus-messiah-david-arnold.

ⁱⁱ Cummings, William Hayman (1904). *Handel*. London. George Bell & Sons. p. 33-34

ⁱⁱⁱ Beale, G. K. (1999). *The book of Revelation: a commentary on the Greek text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press. p. 931

^{iv} Edersheim, A. (1896). *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

^v Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). In *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House. Vol. 2, p. 1409