

Hallelujah Over Hell? How God's People Rejoice While Their Enemies Perish

The word *hallelujah* appears only four times in the New Testament. That might seem surprising to churches and individuals that use the word often. But perhaps most surprising of all is the occasion of those six verses. In fact, one is especially challenging, if not repulsive, to our modern sentiments.

In Revelation 19:1–6, *hallelujah* is the refrain of the saints in heaven. Why are they saying “hallelujah”? Because they’re rejoicing over the destruction of the wicked.

NOW WE SEE DIMLY

How many of us today can barely stomach the thought of divine judgment—particularly *final* judgment? Among those who claim the name of Christ, we may genuinely believe the Bible and acknowledge the reality and justice of God’s wrath and an eternal hell. But, if we’re honest, we often try to avoid the subject. We may, in a way, *tolerate* God’s judgment, but our instinct is to turn away. We don’t *like* it. We may be a touch embarrassed by it. We plainly don’t think of hell as a reason for God’s people to *rejoice*.

Elements of this impulse are right and good. God doesn’t mean for the idea of hell to be pleasant. Hell is horrible beyond description. It bears witness to the infinite value of the God who has been dishonored by those thrown there. Yet in Revelation, the saints, secure in Christ, *rejoice*. The idea that we might someday *enjoy* God’s justice and power on display in his judgment—the idea that hell might provoke our *Hallelujah!*—seems almost imponderable.

Yet on that day, we will see more clearly, and think more truly, and feel more duly. We will appreciate more fully the value of the glory of God, and we will know more truly the wickedness of humans in their rebellion against him, no matter how mannerly and civil they may have seemed in polite society. We will have new capacities to perceive the glory of God, and we will rejoice in his power on display in the destruction of the wicked. Even now, we can shape our hearts to rejoice appropriately in those truths.

AFFIRM GOD’S TRUTH—AND HEART

Even with those disclaimers, though, many of us may have some serious room for emotional growth as we ponder whether we will be able to be happy in heaven when we know people are in hell.

To begin, we would be wise to beware pretending our moral compass is better than God’s. Some Christians today may reluctantly think about hell, *Well, God said it. I’ll believe it, but I don’t like it.* It’s the same refrain we might hear about the complementary callings of men and women, or about any number of issues on the front lines of conflict between Christian

teaching and prevailing notions in modern society. While we might admirably profess to hold to God's Word, our "not liking it" is no evidence of maturity. In fact, it's an expression of moral immaturity, if not error or sin.

The *admission* that we do not like something that God says, does, or commands presents us with an opportunity to grow emotionally in our likeness to Christ, who talks about hell more than anyone else in the pages of Scripture (eight times in the Gospel of Matthew along with Mark 9:43–48 and Luke 12:5).

INSPIRED BY JUDGMENT

We want to mature in this by meditating on the happiness of God's people not *despite* but *because of* God's destruction of the wicked. We should look to passages like Revelation 19 for help. We should steep our souls in them.

More blood flows in the pages of Revelation than anywhere else in Scripture. And yet, what's the defining tenor of God's people from beginning to end? They worship (Rev. 4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:16; and more). Their joy in God overflows in audible praise.

As God's horrific judgments fall one after another on the wicked, the torments of the damned in hell cannot diminish the delight of the saints in heaven. In fact, God's judgments inspire his people to praise him all the more. As his justice descends on those who endure and deepen in their rebellion against their Maker, God's people rejoice because they know themselves to be recipients of his grace.

JUDGMENT FOR YOU

If we could roll back the clouds and peek into heaven, we would see martyrs crying out for justice: "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Rev. 6:10). We would hear an angelic call to worship "because the hour of his judgment has come" (Rev. 14:7). We would hear yet another "song of Moses" in which the saints in heaven proclaim, "All nations will come and worship you, *for your righteous acts have been revealed*" (Rev. 15:4).

Heaven's praises then culminate in Revelation 18 and 19. God's judgment displays his *might* for the watching eyes of his worshiping people (Rev. 18:8). The destruction of Babylon summons his saints to worship:

Rejoice over her, O heaven,

and you saints and apostles and prophets,

for God has given judgment *for you* against her! (Rev. 18:20)

"For you," it says to the saints. Divine judgments against the wicked are *for you*.

HALLELUJAH OVER HELL

The climax of God's judgment comes in Revelation 19:1–6. It's here that God's people break forth in the four *hallelujahs* (verses 1, 3, 4, and 6). Why hallelujah now? Because God's people praise him for the judgment through which he saves them:

Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute [Babylon] who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants. (Rev. 19:1–2)

Then, again, they cry, "Hallelujah!" and declare, "The smoke from her goes up forever and ever" (Rev. 19:3). Finally, the voice of a great multitude erupts in verse 6: "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns." The day is coming when the people of God will *rejoice* that his judgment has fallen on the wicked. Then we will know and feel in full what we now know and feel only in part.

On that day, and for all eternity, the horrors of hell will not spoil the joy of Jesus' bride. As imponderable as it may seem to some of us now in this disorienting in-between age, the decisive and eternal demonstration of God's justice and power through the eternal destruction of the wicked will occasion the praise and joy of God's people.

JOY IN THE END—AND NOW

When we get to glory, we'll find eternal joy in the God of lavish mercy and uncompromising justice. In fact, we wouldn't *be able* to find eternal, ever-increasing, ever-deepening joy in a God who was unjust. Deep down, we don't want a God without wrath and power. We don't want a God who affirms the wicked, or simply leaves them be. We don't ache for a God who stands idly by while evil goes unpunished.

Soon enough, the shades of grey will be gone, and those outside of Christ will be revealed as hardened rebels against their Creator; haters of the God we love; abhorers of the Christ we adore, and of his bride. There's an all-stakes war going on for the cosmos—one we ignore to our own peril.

While we may struggle now with how the eternal destruction of the wicked could be a cause for joy, we won't struggle forever. Yet we can still grow and mature in this life. What we can't feel now, we will feel soon enough. When the day comes, we won't dodge the truth but delight in it. No more will we wonder how these things can be so. We will know, and we will worship.

We will not cringe. We will cry *hallelujah*.

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