

# "Holy Communion: Deliverance from Hell"

Revelation 19:5-9

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Midweek - Advent 3

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Boise, Idaho

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The Word of the Lord from the 19th chapter of the Revelation to St. John:

Then a voice came from the throne, saying, "Praise our God, all you His servants and those who fear Him, both small and great!" And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, "Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! "Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready." And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!' " And he said to me, "These are the true sayings of God." (Rev. 19:5-9)

This is the Word of the Lord.

## I. Heaven and Hell

For the past two weeks, we've looked at two of man's greatest fears-death and judgment. And we've heard that the Lord delivers us from these even now. So that you might not suffer the second death-eternal death of your soul, Christ has died your death. Furthermore, He's already joined you to His death in Holy Baptism. While your flesh must still endure dying, your soul already has eternal life. Likewise, the sinner rightly fears the judgment of God on the Last Day; however, we heard last week that Christ the Judge has already sentenced Himself to death in your place for your sin. Because He has endured the punishment, He declares you "not guilty," and He doesn't make you wait until Judgment Day to hear it. With every Absolution, His "I forgive you for all of your sins" declares the verdict that you will hear at the final Judgment. You are "not guilty" for Jesus' sake.

If death and judgment are unpopular topics today, then the third fear is even more so-it is hell. In a great show of illogic, surveys show that the vast majority of Americans believe in heaven, but only a minority believe in hell. Perhaps they believe that all people eventually get to heaven, or perhaps they believe that unrepentant sinners simply disappear. However, what they believe is really immaterial; what matters is what the Lord says in His Word.

Simply put, hell is a domain where God is not present to preserve and forgive; it is the everlasting place for those who want nothing to do with Him. If the Lord is not present to sustain and give grace, then all that is left is a dark, violent, hopeless chaos. On the other hand, heaven is where God is present in His glory with His people for eternity. There, He preserves and sustains His redeemed people forever; so while hell is described as a chaos of sulfur, fire and despair, Revelation 21 describes heaven by saying, "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed

away" (Rev. 21:4). Now, please understand that these are articles of faith. You and I cannot conceive of what hell or heaven are really like. The most disastrous day on earth is nowhere close to hell, because this world is not God-forsaken. Likewise, the most paradisiacal day on earth is nowhere close to heaven, because the curse of sin remains. Therefore, rather than seek to sense what they are like, we trust what the Lord says of them in His Word.

In Revelation 19, the Lord compares heaven and hell to two different feasts. Hell is described as "the supper of the great God" (Rev. 19:17) and the imagery is of a battlefield. All who reject the Lord, both small and great, stand arrayed against Him, and they are defeated for eternity. They are pictured as slain soldiers scattered across the field, and the birds of the air feast upon them. This is the "the supper of the great God:" where people refuse the Lord's feast of forgiveness and life, they become the feast of the dead instead. Where they had nothing, what they have is now taken away from them; and there is no one there to lay them to rest. It's a grisly picture of a never-ending death.

On the other hand, heaven is described in the same chapter as "the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev. 19:9). This is a banquet feast of joy. The Church-the bride of Christ-is finally brought to the wedding hall, and the long-awaited celebration is never-ending. The feast never ends because the Lord is the host, providing all things. It is the Lord's supper, and He will never stop providing for His people.

So heaven and hell are described as two different feasts; and clearly, you want to be at one and not the other.

The Good News, of course, is this: heaven is already yours. When Jesus joined you to His death in Holy Baptism, He also joined you to His resurrection. And since He is in heaven forever, you will be in heaven forever, too. Heaven has been yours since your Baptism; and to keep it that way, the Lord has continually announced your "not-guiltyness" by His Word of Absolution. Heaven is yours. The promise is sure.

But be warned. The devil is going to do his wicked best to make you think that heaven could never be yours. In fact, he's going to try hard to make you think that you're in hell already. When Jesus suffered hell on the cross for you, His cry was, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" Satan would like nothing better than for this to be your despairing cry instead of Christ's. He will therefore seek to spear you with such miserable afflictions so that you doubt that God is faithful. For this, the evil one hauls out the most barbarous, remorseless weapons of his arsenal.

It is easy for us to voice confidence in the Lord when we are relatively healthy, but chronic pain and long-term affliction wear us down and seek to exhaust our faith. They can leave us resentful toward the Lord and so gruff toward others that we end up isolated, alone. That's the goal of such trials, to make you believe that you are alone, that God has forsaken you.

Each one of us extremely capable of committing sins that we will regret for a lifetime. Guilt can be overwhelming, even when we have heard the Gospel that Christ forgives us for all of our sins. The devil seeks to use this guilt with needling precision, to make you believe that your shame is far more powerful than God's grace, that you're cut off from Jesus until your guilt is gone. If you're cut off, then forgiveness isn't possible and you have no hope.

The devil loves to use grief to isolate you, too. When you must mourn the death, the separation, of a

loved one, he will seek to persuade you that death is far too powerful an enemy-that you are separated from God as well. He seeks to use the grave as his best argument that God doesn't care, that you are forsaken.

So the evil one fires his poison arrows; and all too often, they find their mark and they hurt. They hurt badly. He seeks to argue that God has already forsaken you, that you are already undergoing a hell of sorts. After all, he will hiss, if God really cared for you, how could such things happen? He wants you to feel like the battlefield dead, the birds picking away because no one cares enough to lay you to rest. And make no mistake, these wounds are too much for us and our feeble strength; and at such times, if we seek to find God in our feelings or experiences instead of His Word, then we will only conclude that God is nowhere to be found.

But take heart, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, and remember two things. First, the devil is always a liar, who seeks to deceive you away from heaven so that you might suffer the prison of hell. Second, your Lord Jesus Christ, who has suffered your death and your judgment, has also suffered hell for you on that cross. Risen again, He is always faithful; and He remains near to you, to strengthen and preserve you in the one true faith unto life everlasting. Now, those words should sound familiar enough: they are the words of the dismissal after you've received the Lord's Supper. And there, dear friends in Christ, is your hope when plagued with threats of hell. Because there is where Jesus says, "I have not forsaken you, but I am here with you. Take and eat, this is My body. Take and drink, this is My blood...for the forgiveness of sins."

## II. The Lord's Supper

It doesn't look like much of a meal, does it? It's a thin wafer of unleavened bread and a sip of wine. It doesn't look like it could be much more than a symbol, a reminder; but you know better. As you prepare for Christmas next week, you ponder the manger in Bethlehem. You think of the infant in Mary's arms-helpless, vulnerable, fragile, in need of constant care. He doesn't look like much of a Savior. But He's God in flesh-all-powerful, all-knowing, come to save the world from sin.

That same newborn body in Mary's arms grows up to be a man; and as a man, He offers that same body on the cross for your sins and sheds His blood for your redemption. Three days later, He rises again-body, blood and all. And now, He gives you this same body and blood in this Holy Communion-His body and blood that have conquered death and grave. And hell.

And where the devil seeks to make you miserable so that you think God has forsaken you, your Savior comes in a most tangible way and says, "Here I am." Why? To strengthen and preserve you in the one true faith-from the devil's temptations and lies that would lead you to forsake your Savior. What for? For life everlasting. Here, in this Supper, Jesus gives you forgiveness and eternal life in heaven once again.

Too abstract? Then consider this.

We spoke before of the devil's weapon of chronic illness, seeking to argue that God doesn't care. From God's Word, you know better. Illness is not a result of God's apathy, but a wage of sin. Because we live in a sinful world, our body and blood will fail. But this does not mean that God doesn't care-far from it! Do you suffer from failing health? Then come to the Supper of your Lord. For here, Jesus makes this promise to you: "Take and eat. Take and drink. I am giving you My body

and blood. I have borne all of your infirmities to the grave, and they could not keep Me there. I have risen from the dead with an incorruptible body, and this is the body I now give to you. Therefore, rest assured that I have not forsaken you. Instead, I tell you this: on the Last Day, I will raise you up with a body incorruptible. You will have no more sickness and no more pain, and I will wipe away every tear from your eyes." Oh, when you suffer the temptations of illness and affliction, make haste to the Sacrament of the Altar; for though your body and blood fail you, Christ's body and blood will not.

We mentioned before the devil's tool of guilt and shame, the torment of regret. The Lord calls you, penitent, to His table. He gives you His body and blood-for what? For the forgiveness of sins! He declares to you, "Sometimes regret will run so deep that you may feel guilty for the rest of your life on earth. But it doesn't matter how you feel-what matter is what I say! And I tell you that, at this Supper, I am here with forgiveness-and My forgiveness is far more powerful than your feelings of shame. Where you still experience guilt, know that its power is gone, and let it remind you of your need for Me; and make haste to the altar again, for I will forgive you again."

And we mentioned the devil's use of grief, to use the loss of loved ones to convince you that you are isolated, all alone. This evil lie is also shattered at this Supper, which proclaims the exact opposite. You see, at the Lord's Supper, Jesus is present with you. At the same time, He remains present in heaven with those saints who have died before us. Therefore, at Holy Communion, you are together in Christ with those believers who have died, and this is your comfort; if they died in the Lord, you are together with them in the Lord. For now, they worship on the other side of the altar; but you will see them again.

The Lord's Supper is a great comfort that you are not forsaken. Remember the definition of hell? It is the place where God is not-or at least where He is not with grace. But there, at the altar, the Lord is present with you. He is so present that He gives you His body and blood; and He gives it to you for the forgiveness of sins. Oh, no: no matter the devil's manipulations, you are not forsaken. This Supper is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, for Christ your Bridegroom comes to you to prepare you for that eternal wedding day.

You are not forsaken. Far from it.

You are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.  
Amen