

Global Missions Conference

Hallelujah! Amen!

Revelation 19:1-10

As I say, it's an absolute joy to be here with you at Briarwood these days. I've just felt so totally enveloped by your love and by your friendship and by your support. It's been an absolute delight to be in fellowship with you, and to be sharing with you over these past few days at one of the popular TV shows that my family loves is The Great British Bake Off, but that now has a competitor.

The Great Briarwood bake off. And congratulations to all the young people and others who have participated in that. That has been absolutely fabulous and wonderful, and we love seeing those cakes. And maybe afterwards we get to taste them even better.

Let me read this evening from the scriptures as we find them in the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation. And we're reading in chapter 19, revelation and the 19th chapter, John is recording his vision of what's happening in heaven.

He says, after this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying out, Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just, for he is judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality and has avenged on her the blood of his servants.

Once more they cried out, Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up forever and ever. The 24 elders and the four living creatures fell down and worship God who was seated on the throne saying, Amen. Hallelujah! And from the throne came a voice saying, Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him small and great. And then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the ruler of many waters, and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, Hallelujah!

For the Lord our God, the Almighty reigns. 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. It was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure. For the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. Amen.

May God bless to us again this reading of his truth, one of the great themes of redemptive history that we've mentioned a couple of times this weekend is that God is calling out to himself, a people who will worship him forever.

In fact, you could say that the whole story of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation is the story of God's quest to call together a worshiping community drawn from every nation under heaven. And that's that the focus that is the goal of all our missionary endeavors, that God will be worshiped and praised by the people of every nation.

And the wonderful truth is that God achieves his goal and his purpose. Because the final picture of the people of God in the Bible is of this innumerable company gathered before him, and praise and worship and adoration, even nine, even nine our dear friends who have gone from this world to be with Christ are worshiping and serving God in His presence, so that when we gather here on earth for worship, there is this heavenly dimension.

We're not just uniting with our brothers and sisters around the world who worship God in spirit and in truth, but where uniting with the church in heaven, as the old prayer book says, we're united with angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven in rendering praise and worship to the Lord, the church militant and earth, the Church Triumphant and heaven share that same activity of worshiping and praising the Lord.

Remember how Charles Wesley put it in one of his great hymns, that sense on earth in concert. Sing with those whose rest is one for all the servants of our King in earth and heaven are one. Or we sing it in the church as one foundation. Yet she on earth has a union with God. The three and one, and mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is one.

I don't think that we consider this connection between the church on earth songs at church and heaven. Enough! This mystic, sweet communion. And yet it's most instructive and enriching for us who are part of the church here on earth, to eavesdrop on the worship of our brothers and sisters in glory. And as we listen to their worship, not only is our own worship enriched, but the whole tone of our Christian lives.

And I believe our commitment to global mission is totally transformed. And that's what we're allowed to do. As we read Revelation 19, John says, I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying out, and what is particularly interesting and relevant to us is that this sound was heard by John when he was caught up in a period of intense suffering and persecution on earth.

The church on earth was experiencing the most bitter and the most intense period of persecution. The blood of Christian martyrs ran like a river across the Roman Empire. It was a time of awful suffering and fierce persecution, and John himself was caught up in that suffering. He identifies himself in chapter one as our brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom of the patient.

Endurance centered in Jesus. So he is not only exiled on Patmos, I'm prevented from being part of the fellowship of the church. He loves. But on Patmos he's subjected to hard labor, quarrying stones from the cliffs and in the mines. And for an old man like John, this was painful and difficult work. Occasionally he would have been close to the shoreline, perhaps quarrying stones from the cliffs above the beach, or transporting those stones to the ships at the harbor, where they would be taken to build roads all across the Roman Empire.

And as they looked out across the sea, he would be reminded of his sisters and brothers on the mainland of Asia minor. They thought of them as they faced the terror of persecution and of suffering and even martyrdom. I heard, he said, the worship of the redeemed in heaven. And it was into this situation of suffering and pain and heartache for his brothers and sisters that he was allowed to hear the song of worship in heaven.

He was in the spirit on the Lord's day. He had a vision of the risen, glorified Christ, and Christ gives to him this majestic insight into the celestial gathering, and it transformed John's perspective and his experience. And you and I, friends, as we are caught up in the suffering and in the frustration of this life, as we labored in the course of mission and ministry, we too need to listen to the worship of the heavenly company for what they say and shout and sing can renew and restore our perspective, can galvanize us, can fortify us for all the challenges of Christian living and Christian ministry.

So John sees and hears what's going on in heaven. The 24 elders, the four living creatures, fell down and worship God who was seated on the throne saying, Amen. Hallelujah! Two words that we all know very well, and even though in many ways they are strange words, we need to make them part of our vocabulary. Amen. So let it be.

Nay, God's will be done and Hallelujah, praise the Lord. Praise be to Jehovah. And it is this the church on earth repeats the theme of heaven's worship that she's drawn in to the majestic worship of the saints and the elders around the throne. That this poor, fragile, suffering people of God on earth can learn the language of their friends and glory and the darkness, opinions and the disappointment of this world are illuminated and transformed by the light and the joy of heaven itself.

Listen again as they shout and sing. Amen. Hallelujah. Let me suggest to you that those words contain at least four important notes, and the four notes make up the harmony of worship and the victory of faith. The first note of worship is simply the acceptance of the will of God. The soul that worships God in heaven is one which stands before his awesome presence and says Amen.

So let it be, Lord. Your will be done whenever they have been the earthly experience of those who are now in glory, whatever they may have suffered and endured in the presence of God. There's no rebellion in their hearts. No doubt, when they were involved in the heat of the battle in this life, when they were suffering and struggling and crying and in pain, they wondered what was going on.

And undoubtedly they asked, as we often do, what's the point, Lord? Why are you bringing me through this experience? Do you have a plan and a purpose? Lord, please tell me, what are you doing? But from the perspective of eternity, those questions have been silenced. They know. See the plan in all its perfection. They understand fully and they rest, content and happy in the knowledge that God's plan has been good.

Amen. They cry. So be it, Lord, your will be done. And from the light of eternal day they cry back to us, that all is well, and by God's grace we too shall one day see and

understand as they do. And we too shall sing our amens. And we begin to learn the melody here. And I is here to know that our worship of God can instruct us and help us and encourage us, because under the strain of suffering and frustration and grief of this life, we all have our questions.

But we must learn to rest in the plan and purpose of our gracious and sovereign Lord. And if we struggle with that, then we're encouraged to know that our Savior Himself endured the same experience with the red agony of Gethsemane on his bright he prayed, O father, if it's possible, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done.

Amen, father. So let it be. And sometimes we look into the darkness of illness and death and bereavement, or we see the catastrophe that's about to descend on our hopes and our dreams and our plans. And we want to cry out, oh Lord, please don't let that happen. I couldn't stand it. Lord, please don't let it come to pass.

That was how it was with Peter. Caesarea Philippi Jesus took the disciples into his confidence. He told them that his art had come. He's about to enter the theater of cosmic conflict. He's about to offer himself for the sins of the world. It was his father's will, and he could do no other. And he explained to them what was about to happen.

And Peter was horrified. He couldn't accept the idea that he would lose his Lord. Master, this can't happen, he said. I refuse to say Amen to it. Whatever the situation requires, this shall not be. And if we had been part of that group of disciples, we might have said the very same thing. Standing at Golgotha, we would have said, please come down from that cross.

Jesus, there's no way that this can be the will of God for you. And we would have worked and prayed and long for it not to come to pass. Yet if that had happened, the world would never have been saved. Heaven's door would have remained locked and bolted forever. We would never have been forgiven or justified. And folks, it's hard and it's difficult even when we're facing the breaking point and are hurt by some cruel enigma of life.

We've got to learn to say Amen. So let it be. And it is in our worship of God that we begin to learn to sing that note. It's through our worship that we learn this important lesson. If we have Christ, we have all that we need to possess Christ, and to be possessed by him is the only assurance that we need.

Because he's the Shepherd, he will not leave us or desert us. He gathers the lambs in his arms. He carries them in his bosom. He's the good and the kind one who provides a table for us, even when we're surrounded by the enemies of disease and disappointment and death. When Cleopatra faced the wreck and ruin of her hopes and dreams, she cried out in bitterness.

It was hard for me to fling my scepter at the injurious gods, since they have stolen my jewel. And that's often the response of the unbelieving heart. In their anger and loss.

Unbelievers often respond to God and to the church in a very negative way, but those who share in the worship of the living God have another response that brings them in humility to the feet of the King of heaven and enables them to say Amen.

Thy will be done. And that leads us to this second note of worship. Because worship not only leads us to accept the will of God, but that leads us to a commitment to the purpose of God. In this same chapter 19 of revelation, John has a vision of the exalted Christ riding forth into battle, and behind him stream all the saints in glory, the armies of heaven riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen.

They're on a crusade. They're on a mission. Because the divine purpose means action and service. They sing. Amen. Your will be done. And they mean help us to do it. The man of worship expresses a desire and a commitment to seeing God's will and acted. That's because Christianity is not all submission and resignation. That's why it's often been misrepresented.

Nietzsche spoke about a slave morality. Marx and Lenin talked about the opiate of the people. But that's not an accurate picture of Christianity. In every age, the risen, conquering Christ has inspired energy and action and courage which has been unsurpassed. Unfortunately, too often Christians have allowed the faith to appear as a reactionary influence in a revolutionary world. The truth is that it's secularism and unbelief which is reactionary from the very beginning.

Authentic biblical Christianity has been revolutionary, isn't not how the activity of the early church was described. They were turning the world upside down, and part of the story of the church through the ages is one of it, marching right up to the most formidable, the most virulent of social evils, and saying, this shall not be. This is not the will of God.

We will not tolerate this tyranny a moment longer. And Christians have been among the first to take the ax to the root of some noxious trees, and they have seen the hideous abuse and the injustice of our world being destroyed and felled in the UK, we remember people like Lord Shaftesbury and William Wilberforce.

Shaftesbury was a strong evangelical whose Christian faith inspired him to a lifetime of social reform. He received a first class honors degree in classics from Oxford. He became a member of Parliament at the age of 25. He campaigned against the inhumane treatment of people with mental health problems. He brought legislation that resulted in improved working conditions for children and women, and especially for those who were working in the mines. He was a close friend of C.H. Spurgeon's. He founded the Ragged Schools, which were charitable organizations that give free education to children who were living in poverty. They reckoned that between 1844 and the 1881, 300,000 children were educated for free, and all that reform came from his solid commitment to the cause of Christ and his commitment to the gospel. And if you're in London, you'll see the monument in the middle of Piccadilly Circus, erected to the memory of Lord Shaftesbury. But today nobody remembers or acknowledges his great

work or acknowledges it as a memorial to his legacy. You see, what I'm saying is that the will of God is not something to be accepted with patience and resolve. It's something to be asserted. There's something to be done. The man of worship is not always a sight. Sometimes it's a shout. It's a call to arms. It's a battle cry. There was a day when David, having brought the ark to Jerusalem, summoned the people to a new campaign, and he told them of the wonderful destiny to which the Lord was now calling them. And that magnificent passage in Chronicles ends with a sudden, irrepressible shout from the whole congregation. All the people said, Amen, and praise the Lord!

Can you imagine the sound of that great Amen echoing around the hills? And the Philistines would hear it, and they would tremble, because Israel was on the march. And, friends, you and I need to back up our prayers and our supplications with the resolution of our lives that are dedicated to the cause of Christ, thy kingdom come. Amen.

Let us be answers to our own prayers that we learn to say Amen. By putting our lives and our resources at Christ's disposal. I have the privilege of working at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, as did your two pastors here serving on the board, giving wisdom and direction to the work of the seminary. And from that small campus in Glenside, Pennsylvania, men and women have gone out across the world with lives dedicated to the cause of Christ, and they've made a difference wherever they have gone.

There's a chorus of amens arising today across the world, from people whose lives were shaped and influenced by what they learned at Westminster. And we continue to be in the business of teaching men and women to say and sing and shout this sound man of heaven, we place in their hands the weapons of the gospel. We teach them how to handle this word of truth, and we send them out so that they can teach others to sing the same Celeste IL song of praise, and that is your calling and mine also, to be so committed to the cause of Christ that we echo in our lives the men of heaven. But thirdly, the song of Heaven is also a joyful song. It's more than an Amen. It's also a joyful hallelujah that the saints in glory are eternally happy. All their sufferings, all their sorrows are nice. Swallowed up in the gladness and felicity of heaven. In thy presence there is fullness of joy. At thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore. And if you have lost that note of joy, then it's in worship of Almighty God that we can recapture it. Isn't it interesting how these themes sit side by side in this book of revelation?

On the one hand, Christ and his people, under pressure, suffering, burdened, oppressed. And yet there keeps breaking through the sound of joyful singing. And that's really the pattern of the Christian life and of Christian ministry, isn't it? Tragedy and triumph, suffering and singing, pean and praise. Amen and Hallelujah. And the New Testament writers speak about glorying and tribulation.

And Peter talks about suffering, grief and all kinds of trials, yet being filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy. As a pastor, it's been my privilege to have been with

people from the office. The most bitter experiences of life. one who comes to mind was an elder in one of the congregations I served. He was a policeman, a member of the church choir. He sang in the Royal Ulster Constabulary Male Voice choir and as a 45 year old, married with three daughters. He was diagnosed with bowel cancer and for three years he fought bravely, bravely and endured all kinds of treatment, but his condition slowly deteriorated. We had been visiting him weekly during the time of his illness and eventually one Wednesday morning, his wife Brenda telephoned me and asked me if I would call with Neil, and I went into the bedroom and in his weak condition, Neil told me that the previous evening he had called Brenda and the girls into his bedroom, had read the Bible, and he had prayed with some. They cried as he told me how tired he was, and that they just didn't have the energy to fight the disease anymore. He just had had enough and he was feeling remorseful about having done that, and he was asking me if he had done the right thing. And was it really sinful to want to be with Jesus. And we reassured him. We talked and prayed together and left him in the safe and tender care of our Heavenly Father. And as I left that morning, there was a genuine sense of peace in that form. On Friday morning, Neil passed away, and I still remember standing in the packed meetinghouse with all his police colleagues present and the church members there, and Brenda and the girls standing there so proudly as the police choir began to sing It is well with my soul.

So I came into this worship center today. Hunter was playing at him on the piano. Though Satan should buffet though trials should come. Let this blessed assurance control that Christ hath regarded my helpless estate, and has shed his own blood for my soul, my sin, or the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin not in part, but the whole, is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more. Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, O my soul.

In the midst of the deepest tragedy and the awful loss of this life, there's still a note of joy and praise. The exiles in Babylon were struggling with an awful burden. Missing the Lord's song. In a strange land. By the rivers of Babylon. We sat down. We wept as we remembered Zion. And we too can complain. What room is there for singing hallelujah. In the fierce and bitter Babylon of this world in which we find ourselves? But there's reason for us to be joyful, not really. Brings us to this final note that the reason for the joy and the exuberance of heavenly worship is because of the assurance of final victory.

The saints in heaven shout hallelujah! Because from their perspective in the history of redemption, they see that everything has been accomplished. The conflict is past. Christ is victorious. No wonder they're happy. And no wonder they sing for joy because something significant has happened in history. There's been an advent. There's been a cross. There's been a resurrection. Christ in God and Christ has net.

The powers of darkness and of hell, and has triumphed gloriously, and nothing has been left undone once and for all. Atonement has been achieved, death has been destroyed, and the doors of the kingdom are flung wide open once and for all. God has devised a plan which will bring this ruined world out of its chaos and out of its darkness,

because the enemy has been defeated, the kingdom of God is triumphant, and the saints of God in heaven see it all so clearly.

Oh, that we might share in their vision. We're thrilled when we hear the joyful majesty of Handel's music and the great Hallelujah chorus. Hallelujah, Hallelujah! The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ. And he shall reign forever and ever. And one day. Friends, do you and I will be part of that great cosmic Hallelujah chorus.

We will sing for the eternity, and the hallelujahs will echo and recall across the cosmos. 50 years after John wrote this book, there was a frightening martyrdom in the city of Smyrna. Statius Quadratus was the proconsul. The elderly Polycarp, bishop and saint, was brought to trial. His judge stood before him and cried, you are to announce your Christian faith.

You are to curse the name of Christ. But the famous words we all know, Polycarp replied, for scored in six years have I served him, and he never did me wrong. How can I revile my King and my Savior? And they took him, and they burned him at the stake in the amphitheater. And when the young church of Smyrna came to write down in its annals what had happened, it did so very thoughtfully.

You can say it did so in the spirit of divine defiance against Polycarp. Murderers. They were very careful to present the precise state. And then they wrote, Polycarp was martyred. Statius Quadratus, being proconsul of Asia and Jesus Christ being king forever. And their suffering and their loss was seen in the context of the sovereign rule of King Jesus.

Nothing there enemies could do could dethrone Christ our Lord and friend. So that's the perspective we need to have. Yes, sometimes we struggle. Yes, the battle is often hard and the road can be steeper and often rougher than we had hoped it would be. Yes, the pain and the heartache can be paralyzing, but we know it's all leading.

The outcome is assured. And today, amid the shadows of our world, we can lift our eyes and we can join our voices. With the church triumphant in the presence of the Lord himself, we can sing the praises of our Redeemer, who even now is gathered in his kingdom, and his glory will one day cover the earth, even as the waters cover the sea.

We have a great and a glorious future before us, and that is why we sing. Amen. May your will be done. We sing Hallelujah. May your praise be sung. The 24 elders, the four living creatures fell down and worship God who was seated on the throne. And they cried on the end. Hallelujah!

Let's pray.

Father, we give you thanks for our glorious Redeemer, Jesus Christ. And even though, Lord, we pause to thank you for the memory we have of those who once sat here with us and who shared in the missional ministry of this congregation. I know they are with

you, Lord, which is far better, and they see everything perfectly. Help us, Lord, to join with them as they sing and shout their diamonds and hallelujahs around the throne of the lamb.

Give us this perspective, O Lord, so that we may endure, so that we may be fortified in all our work and ministry. For you. In Jesus name. We pray. Amen.