

Revelation 7:9-17

⁹After these things I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing in front of the throne and of the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰They called out with a loud voice and said:

Salvation comes from our God, who sits on the throne, and from the Lamb.

¹¹All the angels stood around the throne, the elders, and the four living creatures. They fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, ¹²saying:

Amen. Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and might belong to our God forever and ever. Amen.

¹³One of the elders spoke to me and said, “These people dressed in white robes, who are they and where did they come from?”

And I answered him, “Sir, you know.”

¹⁴And he said to me:

These are the ones who are coming out of the great tribulation.

They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵Because of this they are in front of the throne of God, and they serve him day and night in his temple.

He who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them.

¹⁶They will never be hungry or thirsty ever again.

The sun will never beat upon them, nor will any scorching heat,

¹⁷for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd.

He will lead them to springs of living water.

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Coming Out

I.

Today’s sermon text from the Second Reading for today is from Revelation, perhaps the most misunderstood and misused book of the Bible. So many people try to cram timelines into Revelation, saying that things must occur in a certain order for the world to reach the last days, and then *within* the last days.

John’s Revelation is a vision. The imagery draws from many different places in the Old Testament.

I mention this as we start today because within this reading John speaks about the Great Tribulation. This is one of those things that is misunderstood. The writer to the Hebrews clearly identifies the last days. He writes: “In the past, God spoke to our forefathers by the prophets at many times and in many ways. ²In these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe” (Hebrews 1:1-2, EHV). The writer identifies Old Testament times as the past, and the whole New Testament era, from the birth of Jesus onward, as “these last days.”

Rather than a timeline, in Revelation God gave a vision to John to look at these last days from a number of different perspectives.

Let’s say this pulpit is the last days. You don’t see it from my perspective very often, and I don’t see it from *your* perspective, either. Let me look at it from down here. From here there is a parament, a cloth hanging, in the color of the church year. Right now, it is white for the Easter season. There is a cross. If I look up, perhaps I can see the hint of some

electronic device peeking above the top, suggesting that there is something holding it there.

From the opposite side, it looks much different. There are shelves in this pulpit. One holds a bottle of water. The top section has, not one, but *three* electronic devices. One is all set to continue the service after the sermon is concluded, another mirrors the screen, and still another contains words for the sermon itself, with highlights to note when the pastor needs to click to go to the next slide.

From the sides, things look still different, but we won't bother talking about them.

John, in his vision given by God, was privileged to see the End Times from several different perspectives. He wrote them all down for us in the book that contains his vision.

II.

“After these things I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing in front of the throne and of the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and with palm branches in their hands” (Revelation 7:9, EHV). This particular part of John's vision shows the elect in heaven. The picture uses the Festival of Shelters from Leviticus 23 (beginning at verse 33). This was a festival at harvest time. Part of it was to wave branches from palm trees in the air. John's vision pictures the harvest of souls that are in heaven. They come from every part of humanity imaginable, but they all have something in common: they wear white robes to show they have been washed clean of all their sins.

While these are interesting details, the most important thing to note is what they are doing. These people from every nation, tribe, people, and language, are standing in front of the throne and in front of the Lamb, Jesus. The next verse tells us what they are doing: “They called out with a loud voice and said: Salvation comes from our God, who sits on the throne, and from the Lamb” (Revelation 7:10, EHV). Their words are words of worship. The most important thing they can do is to speak about the salvation God has brought to people.

III.

“One of the elders spoke to me and said, ‘These people dressed in white robes, who are they and where did they come from?’ And I answered him, ‘Sir, you know.’¹⁴ And he said to me: ‘These are the ones who are coming out of the great tribulation’” (Revelation 7:13-14, EHV). “Are coming” is an important translation. One popular version of the Bible translates “have come.” The verb in the Greek is not past tense, but present tense. The process John sees in his vision is an ongoing occurrence.

Where they are coming from on an ongoing basis is also important to note. They are coming out of the great tribulation. Remember, the Last Days are the entire New Testament era. The great tribulation is not some mysterious portion of these last days, but is the entire last days.

Those who are coming out of this great tribulation have experienced many difficulties in their lives. Sometimes, perhaps, they have gone through times of persecution in their lives. In every case, they have dealt with sin and its consequences. They have experienced sorrow and tears and loss. They have dealt with things that are the result of an imperfect world after the Fall into sin—difficulty earning a living, bad weather, severe storms, violence, and everything else Jesus said would be the signs that the end is coming.

They have experienced these things, but they are coming out, one by one. Each faithful believer, at his or her own last day, hears that special call from the Lord Jesus to come to the eternal mansion he has prepared.

How is it possible, especially when we remember what scripture says of every human being: “Certainly, I was guilty when I was born. I was sinful when my mother conceived me”

(Psalm 51:5, EHV). How is it possible to call people who were sinful from conception people who are eligible to keep on coming out of the great tribulation to join those who have preceded them?

“They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:14, EHV). Our sins were paid for by Jesus on the cross. After being abandoned by the Heavenly Father to suffer the pain of hell alone as he hung there, he finally cried out: “It is finished.” By saying that, we heard in our Lenten season, Jesus was declaring that he had completed everything the Heavenly Father demanded for the salvation of the world. But had he?

God raised Jesus from the dead. That’s what we have been celebrating in this Easter season. We were reminded that this language was specifically chosen by the writers of Scripture so we would know that God accepted Jesus’ sacrifice for sins. Jesus’ resurrection proves that God sees our debt of sin as payed in full.

So, each believer has a robe washed in the blood of Christ. Paul explains what that means in his Letter to the Romans: “If we have been united with him in the likeness of his death, we will certainly also be united with him in the likeness of his resurrection” (Romans 6:5, EHV). Each believer, when called through death into everlasting life, is received into paradise, just like the repentant thief on the cross. Each believer shares in Jesus’ suffering and death, and each will share in his resurrection.

IV.

“Because of this they are in front of the throne of God, and they serve him day and night in his temple” (Revelation 7:15, EHV). Each of those who are coming out of the great tribulation, one at a time when God sees fit to call them, gathers with those who have preceded us to worship at the throne of God and serve God.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, it is important to note the final verses of our text. “He who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. ¹⁶They will never be hungry or thirsty ever again. The sun will never beat upon them, nor will any scorching heat, ¹⁷for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd. He will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Revelation 7:15-17, EHV).

The Lamb of God will be their shepherd. The Lamb of God is the shepherd of *all* believers, both those who have already come out of the great tribulation, and those who still wait below to be called. Those who are already with him in heaven have left the tribulation of this world. They already enjoy the springs of living water. They already enjoy eyes that no longer shed tears. They already enjoy paradise, without the sun beating on them or scorching heat, or hunger or thirst.

We...wait. The fact that there are daily believers coming out of this great tribulation is reassuring to us. God continues to keep his promises. He leads us safely through this world of tears until he is ready to bring *you* to the mansion he has prepared in his eternal kingdom.

Never lose heart. Not even when the great tribulation seems overwhelming. Paul reminds us: “I conclude that our sufferings at the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18, EHV).

Watch and pray. Wait for that time God has prepared for you to come out of the great tribulation and join the crowd of people around the throne with your own palm branch to wave at the harvest of souls. Put yourself in the hands of your Good Shepherd, knowing that he will supply you with all you need as you wait, and you will see him face to face at the time he decides is right. Amen.