

In 2005 my mom was diagnosed with Acute Myeloid Leukemia. Her cancer was difficult to treat and progressed quickly. After two rounds of aggressive chemotherapy, it became clear that unless the Lord healed her, Mom's life expectancy would be limited to months.

At the time, I was living in Calgary while my Mom and Dad were living in Surrey. My Dad really struggled to acknowledge that Mom was dying—it was hard for him to talk about it—and so, Mom and I would frequently talk about dying, death, and what it would be like to cross over from this life into the next. We wondered together what it would be like to meet Jesus face to face. We agreed together that our future life with Jesus would be infinitely better than our present one. And do you know what those conversations produced in the two of us? **Hope. Faith. Peace.** In the months leading up to Mom's death, she wasn't afraid.

One of the enduring images I have of my mom comes from the last church service we attended together. Naomi, Luke, and I went home for Christmas and on Sunday we went to Mom and Dad's church. At that point, my Mom's immune system was so compromised that it was no longer safe for her to sit in the congregation; if she picked up a cough or snuffle from someone, it was potentially life threatening. And so, every week my Mom and Dad would arrive a few minutes late, and head up to the balcony—which was closed—where they sat alone; just before the service concluded, they would zip out to avoid any contact with people.

So there we were, together in the balcony, but removed from everyone else. It didn't feel right. It's not what any of us wanted but

we were there, listening to the preaching of the Word and singing songs of thanksgiving to God. At one point, the worship team began to lead the congregation in singing, "Blessed Be The Name."

"Blessed be Your name on the road marked with suffering, though there's pain in the offering, Blessed be Your name. You give and take away, you give and take away, my heart will choose to say, 'Blessed be Your Name.'"

My heart was already tender that morning, and the reality of these lyrics hit home; I was overcome with emotion. I looked over at my Mom and she was standing, singing, with her arms raised. When I think about my Mom, this is the image that frequently comes to mind: approaching death with her arms raised to Jesus. The human heart perishes in the absence of hope, but for the Christian, knowing what is coming makes all the difference. We persevere in the present, knowing that we belong to Jesus—though we die, we know that will awake in His presence to a life without end, a life beyond compare.

Over the past three months we've been making our way through the Book of Revelation. Last week Pastor Linda preached from Revelation 6 and 8 and helped us to understand God's judgement in terms of His goodness. God couldn't be considered good if He ignored evil, oppression, or violence. Iain Provan writes, "The anger of God is never arbitrary; it is always directed at Evil. It is the anger of a Good Person outraged by the corruption of the world".¹

But in between Revelation 6 and 8—chapters that describe God's judgement against evil—comes chapter 7. Revelation 7 comes *after*

¹ Iain Provan, *Seriously Dangerous Religion: What The Old Testament Really Says And Why It Matters*, 68.

the opening of seals 1-6 but *before* the 7th seal is opened. Revelation 7 is an interlude from the intensity of the action. The question is: *why this interlude?* God knows that we are easily discouraged. When we can't see beyond the pain of today, we tend to shut down, lose heart, and give up.

Eugene Peterson writes, “When we experience evil in any form it is felt as total. It blots out everything else. A toothache eliminates awareness of health in every other part of the body. A sore toe makes it impossible to appreciate the wonderful fact that my elbow bends effortlessly.”² Revelation 7 is a word of hope—in the middle of judgement—that calls for courage and perseverance. Revelation 7 says, “**Don't lose hope! Don't give up! Follow the Lamb wherever He goes!**”

At this time I'd like to invite you to turn in your Bibles with me to Revelation 7:1-17. The chapter I'm about to read contains two scenes—vs. 1-8, and vs. 9-17; the one takes place on *earth* and the other in *heaven*, but the two are connected.

After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. 2 Then I saw another angel coming up from the East, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: 3 “Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.” 4 Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.

Vs. 4-8 contains a numbering of the tribes of Israel—12,000 from each tribe.

9 After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. 10 And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”

11 All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying: “Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!”

13 Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?” 14 I answered, “Sir, you know.” And he said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 15 Therefore,

“they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. 16 ‘Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,’ nor any scorching heat. 17 For the Lamb at the centre 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.’”

² Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John & the Praying Imagination*, 73.

This is a dense passage, with a number of complexities that I will not be able to fully explore in the time we have together. And so, following the service, I'm going to host a 15-20 minute Q&A in the Upper Room for anyone who has questions about what I've said, or didn't have time to say. But for now, I'm going to explain what is happening in these two scenes and the connection between them.

1. Scene #1: Coming Judgement and the 144,000

The scene #1 begins with four angels holding back the winds—winds that will bring judgement to the earth. It is very likely that these four winds correspond to the four horsemen described in chapter 6.³ But we're told that these winds are held back until the servants of God are marked with a seal. We are left to wonder:

- *Who are these servants?*
- *What is this seal?*
- **And**, *what is it for?*

Let answer the second and third question before returning to the first. *What is this seal?* In Revelation 14:1 we are told that the 144,000 have the name of the Lamb and the name of God the Father written on their forehead. The “seal” was a sign of identity, and more specifically, of ownership; the seal reveals who belongs to God.

What is this seal for? The seal marks out who belongs to God, and therefore, those who will be protected from God's coming judgement against evil (the winds; the 4 Horseman). But while God's servants will be protected from His judgement, God's enemies will continue to persecute the people of God.

³ C.f. Zechariah 6:2-5.

Now for the first question: *who are these servants?* Verse 4 says, "**Then I heard the number** of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel." But verse 9 says, "**After this I looked**, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language”.

The question to wrestle with is, *Are these two different groups, or one group, described in two different ways?* There are significant differences of opinion on this question and while I am aware of the different opinions, I am going to briefly share my conviction.

John **heard** the number of those who were sealed—144,000—but when he **looked** he saw a multitude too large to count. This is not the first time John has paired hearing and seeing together. In Revelation 1:10 John **heard** a loud voice—sounding like a trumpet—and when he turned he **saw** Jesus: dressed in royal clothes, His eyes blazing like fire, and His face shining like the sun.

In Revelation 5, John **hears** that One has been found who is worthy to implement God's plan for the world—a great Warrior, the Lion of Judah. But when John **looked**—*expecting to see a Lion*—he saw a slain Lamb.

John **heard** the number of those who were sealed—144,000—but when he **looked** he saw a multitude too large to count. I believe this one group of people is being described in two different ways. The phrase “the servants of God” is used throughout the Book of Revelation and in every other case it refers to the whole people of God—Jews + Gentiles—not to ethnic Israel.

Peterson writes, “Rhymed repetition is a favourite device among poets to achieve emphasis. The art of rhyme is to nearly but not quite duplicate the sound...Hebrew poets...rhymed not sounds but meanings. They put along side one another not attention-getting sounds but awareness-evoking meanings. The sentence in Psalm 34:3 is typical: ‘O magnify the Lord with me/and let us exalt His name together!’”⁴

“St. John *hears* the number of the sealed as 144,000. When he looks he *sees* a multitude no one can number. Sound is rhymed with sight....St. John hears God’s declaration of the total number—absolutely complete, not a single one missing...When he himself looks, he sees that this definite total known to God is a numberless multitude beyond calculation from any human point of view. Similarly, these people are all Israel, that is, God’s people from his standpoint; from our standpoint, they come from ‘every nation under heaven.’”⁵

There is much more I could say on this matter but for the time being I’m going to press on; if you’d like to hear more bring your question along with you to the Q&A session after the service.

Regardless of how one interprets the identity of the 144,000, the main idea in this section is clear: **God knows who belongs to Him, and those who do have nothing to fear.** 2 Corinthians 2:21-22 says, “*Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ.*

⁴ Peterson, 83-84.

⁵ Peterson, 84.

⁶ Paul Spilsbury, *The Throne, The Lamb & The Dragon*, 75-76.

He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.”

Before I move on to explore the second scene (vs. 9-17), I want to make one more observation from the first. John hears the number 144,000—12,000 from each of 12 tribes of Israel—what is the theological significance of God counting?

This counting echoes what took place in the Book of Numbers. In Numbers 1, God had Moses conduct a military census to determine how many men—over the age of 20—could serve in Israel’s army. In Revelation 7, God counts out His servants—those who will follow the Lamb into battle. While God’s people have been sealed from God’s judgement, they are caught up in the Holy War that is taking place between the Lamb and the Dragon.⁶

Revelation 6 concludes with a question: *Who can stand in the day of the Lamb’s judgement?* Revelation 7 answers the question: God’s servants can—and will—stand with the Lamb as He brings judgement against the Dragon. **Scene #2** then begins with a vision of a great multitude of martyrs standing before the throne and the Lamb.

2. Scene #2: Standing In God’s Presence

The multitude is standing before the throne, which is to say, they are now at home with God. They were able to “stand” in the day of

judgment, and now they stand in God’s presence. Note too that they are holding palm branches. The week before Jesus was crucified, He rode into Jerusalem and the crowd lined the streets, waving palm branches, and saying “**Hosanna!**,” which is a word of praise that means, “**Save us!**”⁷

And here In Revelation 7, the great multitude sings for joy around God’s throne because their salvation has been fully realized: “*Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.*”

Once again—in vs. 11-12—we see the angels, elders, and four living creatures; their presence connects this scene to what has come before in Revelation 4-5. And they are still singing: “*Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!*”

A few moments ago I referred to a great multitude of martyrs; vs. 13-14 points us in this direction. One of the elders asked John, “*These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?*” [John] answered, ‘*Sir, you know.*’ And he said, ‘*These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*’” This is another much-talked-about phrase in *Revelation*: the great tribulation.

The English word translated as “tribulation” comes from the Greek word “**thlipsis**”—it means “*pressing together,*” or “*pressure*”.

“Thlipsis” can be translated as ordeal, affliction, tribulation, or trouble.

Once again, there are various interpretative traditions when it comes to understanding what the great “ordeal” or “tribulation” is referring to. Some suggest that Revelation 7 refers to a very specific period of time, *in the future*, where a never seen before persecution breaks out against God’s people. This tribulation—when it occurs—will signal the end of the age and the return of Christ. While a case can be made for this interpretation, my study of the text leads to a different conclusion.

The Book of Revelation was written from the island of Patmos, where John had been exiled because he refused to name Caesar Lord and Saviour. John wasn’t the only one who was facing persecution for his faith in Jesus. Revelation 2:13 names Antipas as a faithful witness who had been put to death in Pergamum. John wrote *Revelation* and sent it to the churches, because he saw what was coming. Things were going to get a lot worse before they got better and so he called the church to persevere in the face of the persecution that was coming.

There is nothing in Revelation 7 to indicate that John—or for that matter God—is describing a great tribulation that will take place thousands of years later, in the future. It’s much more plausible that John is concerned with the great ordeal that is coming to Christians in his own time.⁸ The truth is that many Christians, in many places

⁷ John 12:13.

⁸ Gordon Fee, *Revelation*, 114.

throughout history, have experienced great tribulation in remaining faithful to Jesus through persecution. And so, the relevance of *Revelation* continues to this day.

The image in verse 14 is both arresting and odd; it describes a people who have washed their clothes and made them white *in the blood of the Lamb*. This the exact opposite of what we would expect—instead of clothes becoming stained red, clothes washed in the blood of the Lamb become white. *What does this mean?*

Jesus died on a cross for the sins of the world—because of His shed blood we have been cleansed and made right with God. In Isaiah 1:18, the Lord says, “*Come now, let us settle the matter...Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow*”.

The people in Revelation 7 have been cleansed by the death of Jesus, but because of their own faithful witness, they too have been put to death. And like the slain Lamb, these witnesses have overcome and now stand in God’s presence.

illus: When I went through my pastoral training, I learned about the Bible and theology, I was taught how to preach, counsel, deal with budgets, strategic planning, and the like. At the same time that I was being trained in Canada, pastors in China were being trained under very different circumstances. They were taught Bible and theology as well, but in addition, they were taught how to evade Secret Police by jumping out of second story windows without breaking their legs.

We are a long way from martyrdom here in Canada but it is a very real threat for many Christians in many parts of the world. In one sense, John’s *Revelation* doesn’t speak to our current reality in

Canada...he speaks to the church in a time and place where persecution is growing, where choosing to follow Jesus will likely lead to death.

Last week, in Revelation 6:9-11, the martyrs cry out to God saying, “*How long Lord? How long must we wait until justice is done?*” They were told to wait “*a little longer,*” but here in chapter 7:15, the martyrs are comforted by God Himself. “*He who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence*”. The word for shelter literally means “*to pitch His tent over them.*”

illus: A number of years ago I spent two weeks in Israel, and a number of the days were spent hiking in the desert. It was unseasonably hot when we were there, with the temperature climbing as high as 49 degrees Celsius. A number of people were so affected by the oppressive heat that they collapsed and were unable to stand.

On one of these hot days, we visited a place that had constructed a life-size replica of the Tabernacle—the Tent of Meeting. When we entered the Tent, we were shielded from the sun and the wind...the temperature dropped, our bodies cooled, and we were able to rest.

The martyrs of Revelation 7 stand in God’s presence—they are finally “home,” sheltered by God Himself. Verses 16 and 17 describe the future rest that awaits all who place their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ: they will never hunger or thirst again, nor will any oppressive force beat down on them.

In Revelation 5 we learned that the Lion of Judah is a Slain Lamb. But here in vs. 17, we discover that **the Lamb is the Shepherd** who will lead His people to the springs of living water, which signify

healing, rest, and eternal life. Psalm 23 describes God saying, “*The Lord is my Shepherd...He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.*” In John 10 Jesus said, “*I am the Good Shepherd.*”

Revelation 7 concludes with a promise that looks forward to the time when Jesus returns, when the final battle is done, and the world is as God intended it to be. Verse 17 says, “*And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*”

Conclusion: Imagine the greatest day you can and then multiply it by a trillion. Imagine a place where all of our relationships are perfect—no barriers, no bitterness, no regret. Imagine a place where our bodies are strong, healthy, and free from pain—a place where everything is beautiful and purposeful. Imagine a place where the ugliness we see in this world is a distant memory—imagine a place where brokenness of every kind has been eradicated. This is the place that Bible describes as “heaven;” this is what it will be like when we finally stand in God’s presence.

C.S. Lewis once wrote that death is “only the beginning of the real story. Life in this world has only been the Cover and the Title Page...but now at last we begin Chapter One of the great story which no one on earth has read, which goes on forever, and in which every chapter is better than the one before.”⁹

The human heart perishes in the absence of hope, but for the Christian, we know what is waiting for us. We persevere in the present, knowing that our lives belong to Jesus. When we put our

hope in Jesus, we are not promised a way around pain, but hope does give us a way through. One day God will turn our Winter into Spring. One day God will make all things new. And so this day, I invite you to fix your gaze on Him—for the things we see now, will soon be gone, but the life He gives will last forever.

Worship

Invitation to Prayer Ministry/Invite people to Q&A

Benediction

May the love of God the Father, the peace of Christ the Son, and the hope of the Holy Spirit, comfort and keep us all. Amen.

⁹ C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*.

Journey Announcement: We are going to be launching another Journey Discipleship Course beginning on January 8th, on Monday evenings between 7 and 9:30 pm and I want to invite you to consider joining.

From time to time all of us feel “stuck” in life. You may feel “stuck” in your job, in your routines, in your relationships; you may feel stuck in the way you relate to God. I know many devout Christians who are praying, reading their Bibles, and connected in small groups but they are unable to move forward in their lives. They may feel like there are issues beneath the surface of their lives that they need to deal with but they may struggle to articulate what those issues are, or, if they know what they are, to know how to deal with them.

A few years ago, when Pastor Mardi told me about the kind of work that Journey Canada does—to help people experience Jesus in their relationships, sexuality, and identity—I was convinced that we needed to run a Journey program at our own church. But here was my dilemma: how do I ask people to commit to a discipleship journey that I’ve never experienced myself?

And so, a few years ago I attended a 1 week Journey Leadership Intensive event at a Retreat Centre just south of Calgary; the experience was life-changing. It’s not just congregants that get stuck, pastors get stuck too. We are not impervious to broken relationships, identity wounds, or distorted desires.

I was that Christian who chronically obsessed about the gap between who I was and who I wanted to be; at the very least I regularly obsessed about who I thought God expected me to be. The Journey Discipleship Course helped to reveal identity issues that I wasn’t

aware of. What I learned through this course is that Jesus is calling me to journey with Him for a lifetime—to live in the tension between what is and what will be. Instead of being paralyzed by my own brokenness, I began to focus much more on Jesus who ever-walks this journey with me.

I’m grateful to God for Journey Canada and the work they are doing to resource churches like our; Journey Canada has been such a great partner in helping us to lead people to Jesus where they can find healing and wholeness. I would strongly encourage you to attend.

As I said, we are going to be launching the course on January 8th. The application window for this course takes place in the next two weeks; there is also cost but if the cost is prohibitive please let us know and we can help. If you would like more information please contact Pastor Mardi or Pastor Anne.

Now for this morning’s sermon...