

A Celebration For The Ages ~ Revelation 7:9-17

Pastor Colin Rieke ~ April 21, 2013

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. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." 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, saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?" 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. 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. 'Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,' nor any scorching heat. For 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.'"



Grace, mercy, and peace are yours through our risen Savior,

In the next month and a half, a number of our nation's high schools and colleges will be holding graduation ceremonies. There are at least four high-school seniors that I know of at Grace that will be graduating. An achievement like this is cause for celebration, a celebration of completing a prescribed course of study. Take it a step higher – there will be a select number of college students celebrating in four days when they get selected in the NFL draft. There are celebrations when a case is won in a law firm, when a quota is reached in a business, when a championship is won by a team. There can be celebrations for births, graduations, anniversaries, retirements, achievements and holidays, just about anything you can think of. And it is a good thing that we are able to celebrate milestones in our lives or the lives of those that are near and dear to us.

It seems to be part of human nature to celebrate, to set aside some time to enjoy life. Some celebrations are more low key, while others are much larger. Take a moment now to think of a recent large celebration – perhaps you were part of it, or it may be something you just know about. Now compare that to the celebration that was described in our lesson from Revelation. There is nothing here on earth that can compare. And that's something worth thinking about, that's something worth getting excited about, that's something worth getting ready for. John is describing here A CELEBRATION FOR THE AGES. Made possible by:

1. A lamb who shed his blood
2. A shepherd who shelters and provides

Now a few things to note about the book of Revelation that will serve us well through this sermon, and hopefully beyond. It is a book that you may have heard some wild and crazy stories about. It's a book that is subject to misinterpretations left and right because of the style it was written in. But it's also a book that the apostle John wrote to give comfort to God's church on earth, a church that has faced trouble both from outside and within. And knowing this can help weed through everything that has been written *about* this book, and take a look at what has been written *in* this book, a book that gives comfort to a weary traveler.

So what makes Revelation so difficult to read? It is the style that it is written in, called apocalyptic. It is a prophecy or a prediction of the end of the world. John received this prophecy through a vision or a dream which can make it even more difficult. Like other apocalyptic literature, there are many symbols, and descriptions that represent certain things. The use of numbers is especially symbolic. But all of this doesn't mean that the book of Revelation should be shunned and ignored because we can't get anything out of it. We can get much out of it, but we need to remember why it was written.

Remember, the message that God was giving John in a dream was a message directly to seven churches located in present day Turkey. These churches were given both warnings and encouragement to stand firm in the truth of God's Word. Because this was a time when being a Christian was not a pleasant thing. John was encouraging them by saying that Jesus has won. You might say that is the overlying theme of the book of Revelation: Don't be afraid, Jesus has won!

The verses that we have before us in chapter 7 take us to the celebration that is happening in heaven. And what a celebration it is, A CELEBRATION FOR THE AGES. A celebration that includes a great multitude, that no one could count, **"from every nation, tribe, people and language."** They are wearing white robes and are waving palm branches in the air. There are 10,000 x 10,000 angels surrounding this great multitude giving **"praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength"** to God, **"serving him day and night in his temple."** OK, before I go any further how does that sound? I'm sure that there are many of you who would see this for the celebration that it is, a victory celebration in heaven. But how much might we, or even many outside the church, look at this as some never ending church service?

Now, maybe to some, a never ending church service with awesome music and an awesome message sounds good, but not to a vast majority. We have to realize one of the reasons that people give for not coming to church is because it is boring, they can "worship" on their own time. So what appeal would a "never ending church service" hold to them? Nothing. You have the Billy Joel song, *Virginia* which has the lyrics "Only the good die young," and "I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints." This typifies what the world thinks of heaven, it typifies what the world thinks of believers.

But that is exactly why John wrote the book of Revelation. He didn't write it to just say "hang in there," but he wrote it to tell them of what it's going to be like in the end. A few things to be clear about this vision from John. These are people that want to be here, these are people that are thankful to be here, these are people whose eyes have been opened to the truth. These are the people who have been invited to A CELEBRATION FOR THE AGES. It is similar to a barn raising in the rural parts of the country, most popular in the 18th and 19th centuries. A farmer would recruit the community around him to help

him build a barn. The men would do the work of raising the barn, while the women would cook up a storm to feed everybody. With the help of the community, a barn could be raised in a day or two. I think this is the way that John is kind of picturing heaven. It's a place that people want to be, to enjoy time with one another, to enjoy time with the one who invited them.

But how do you get an invitation to this CELEBRATION FOR THE AGES? It certainly can't be by anything that we have done. That is made clear not only in Revelation but also in the rest of Scripture, this is a party that is made possible by a lamb who shed his blood. This lamb is none other than Jesus. It was John the Baptist who cried, **"Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."** It is this lamb that all the saints are praising on the throne of heaven. It is the lamb that is surrounded by the angels and the four living creatures receiving the worship of God.

It is made clear how the multitude in white robes got there. An angel messenger approached John in the vision and asked him, **"These in white robes – who are they, and where did they come from?"** John let the angel answer, **"These are they who are coming out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb."** This is not just a select group of believers, but all believers. In the book of Acts, the apostle Paul made clear to Christians, **"We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God."** Every time a believer dies, they have come out of their tribulation.

But they could not enter with the robes they had, the robes they had were filthy, Isaiah says, **"All our righteous acts are like filthy rags."** But by dipping those rags in the blood of the lamb, they became white robes. White symbolizing purity, the only thing that heaven accepts. Now normally if you dip something in blood, it's not going to become white. But Jesus blood is different. His blood paid for all of our sins, as John says, **"The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sins."** This comes to every believer by undeserving grace. It doesn't make sense but that is what the Bible talks about. Just like it may not make much sense that a little bit of water poured over a baby's head takes away sin, but that's what the Bible promises. The blood that covers over our sins, washes them away is also contained in the waters of Holy Baptism.

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The picture of a lamb is a perfect one of our Savior. In the Old Testament, lambs were offered as sacrifices, just as Jesus was. But Jesus is more than just our sacrificial lamb who takes away our sins. He is also our good shepherd. It's one of those interesting paradoxes in Scripture. The lamb is the shepherd, the shepherd is the lamb. And this CELEBRATION FOR THE AGES is made possible by a shepherd's who shelters and provides.

Because this great multitude has been made white in the blood of the lamb they enjoy all the benefits of the shepherd's care. John writes about several ways in which this happens, **"they serve him day and night...never again will they hunger or thirst...he will lead them to springs of living water...and God will wipe away every tear from their eye."** We may not have a lot of shepherds in our day and age, but I think we still get the picture that these verses bring out. A real shepherd is going to watch after the flock no matter what danger might come. And that is what John wants believers to know our Good Shepherd is going to do. He is going to watch after the flock no matter what danger comes our way. Do you realize what a great comfort that is?

Last fall, when we went back to the Midwest on vacation, we were able to visit a high school friend of ours. This friend had developed a fatal stomach cancer. We were able to visit her less than a week before she died. And while the mood was a little sad, she amazed me with her perspective on life. She had just attended church the Sunday before where they sang her favorite hymns, and the icing on the cake for her was that she was able to suck on popsicles again. All because she knew what was coming. She knew she would be with her Good Shepherd soon.

But we don't need to wait until we are knocking on death's door to realize this, to act this way. We can live with our Good Shepherd by our side every step of life's way. We can get passed the tragedy that happened in Boston last week. We can look beyond that term paper, that tough diagnosis, those sleepless nights with a baby. Those are all reminders that we're not there yet. But these reminders should not get us down, but looking forward to what lies ahead, we can be a different person right here and right now.

We can do all of this because we know what awaits us when we pass through this veil of tears. We will join a host arrayed in white, A CELEBRATION FOR THE AGES. This celebration will not just be us sitting on clouds and playing harps with angel wings not having any fun at all. Maybe we could compare it to Adam and Eve in the Garden. In perfection, God gave Adam the task to tend to the Garden. But Adam did not view this as hard labor, but he was happy and glad to do it. We won't be just sitting around doing nothing up in heaven, but we will be working. But this work will not be a burden but a joy. It will be a joy, because our Good Shepherd will be there. What a time to look forward to. A time that we can get excited about even now. Amen!