

Perspective

Revelation 7:9-17

It's Labor Day weekend. Students and teachers are in back-to-school mode. Tomorrow, the calendar flips from August to September. I've even heard rumors that pumpkin spice beverages have been spotted in the wild. Like it or not, summer is wrapping up. Fall is around the corner.

While I don't want to see summer end, I am excited that college football is back. I start to look forward to the return of college football the day after the final bowl games are played in January. We'll be celebrating Kickoff Sunday here a week from today, and I guarantee I'll be wearing my Ohio State scarlet and gray next week. I hope you're planning to wear your team colors next Sunday, too, as we kick off the start of a new season of discipleship here at E-Free Bemidji.

I watched the first Ohio State game of the season yesterday (they won, by the way), and it made me think back to when I would go to games as a kid with my Dad. I'll never forget the first time I walked into Ohio Stadium and saw 100,000 people filling The Horseshoe.

Think about the last time you were in a sea of people. Thousands of people gathered in one place. When was the last time you were in a place where there were more people gathered than you could count? Maybe some of you made it to the State Fair this year, or you can remember times when you've gone in the past. Picture yourself surrounded by thousands of people at the fairgrounds, or gathered in a football stadium, or seated in a huge arena.

Let me invite you to open your Bible to the very last book of Scripture. This morning, we'll be looking together at the passage we just read from Revelation chapter 7. In this passage, we'll read about a crowd of immeasurable proportions, one that could not be contained in any football stadium we've ever been to.

When you think of the Book of Revelation, perhaps it brings to mind wild accounts of end-times prophecy or strange depictions of symbolic visions. Revelation is certainly a unique book of Scripture, and over the years, it has gained a reputation for being difficult to understand. However, if we consider *why* this book was written in the first place, we should be able to study it and be blessed by it as with any other book of the Bible. Revelation was not only written to point believers to what would take place in the future, it was also written so that God's people would be encouraged to persevere even in the face of great difficulty.

As we turn to Revelation chapter 7 today, we are hopefully going to gain some *perspective*. We are going to get a three-dimensional view of where the church's mission is leading. This perspective should encourage us to remain faithful to the task of disciple-making that the Lord Jesus gave to his church, and it should move us as the church to a greater sense of awe and worship.

Throughout the book of Revelation, the Apostle John describes a series of visions that were revealed to him for the purpose of preserving for the church. The passage that begins in verse 9 opens with John's words, "After this I looked..." Look carefully with me at what is about to be revealed and described. As John begins to look, he sees a vision of a great multitude.

John described this great multitude as being one that “no one could count.” Remember, this is the same John, one of the apostles, who was present with Jesus at the feeding of the 5,000. John had seen large crowds in his day, but this one he described as being too large for anyone to number.

But John was saying more than just that he saw a lot of people. His description points back to a promise made in Scripture in the very first book of the Bible. This scene in Revelation is the fulfillment of a promise in Genesis that God had made to Abraham.

“After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.” But Abram said, “Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.” Then the word of the LORD came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:1-6, NIV).

That promise in Genesis 15 was building off of an earlier promise also made to Abraham when God first called him.

“The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing” (Genesis 12:1-3, NIV).

In Revelation 7, John was given a vision of the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham of a great nation, one that was made up of people from all the families of the earth.

Notice how John describes the makeup of the great multitude in verse 9. The crowd includes believers who come “from every nation, tribe, people, and language.”

John’s vision gives us a **global perspective: We see Jesus’s disciples gathered together from every nation.**

Folks, this is what we have to look forward to when we join this crowd in heaven! We will be together with Christians from every part of the globe. They won’t all look and sound like those who come from Northern Minnesota or even North America. They will speak in languages and tongues more unfamiliar than those we’ve heard in the deep south, on the east coast, or from our neighbors to the north. They will be more diverse than the parade of nations at the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games. The great multitude in heaven will retain their earthly distinctions, and yet they will be unified in their heavenly activity. They will be one multitude made up of a diverse family of nations.

The numbers are sometimes hard to quantify, but according to the website joshuaproject.net, there are just over 17,500 different distinct people groups living in the world today. Of that number, a little more than 7,300 of those people groups are considered unreached (roughly 42%). Joshua Project defines unreached this way:

“Just because someone does not believe the gospel does not mean they are unreached. “Unreached peoples” are actually those who have no opportunity to hear the gospel at all. They don’t have a chance because they don’t have a Jesus follower nearby to explain the good news of Christ to them. In most instances, there is no church, no Bible, and no way of hearing about the love of God and His redeeming work through the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ.”

John’s vision gives us a *global* perspective. We get a picture in Revelation 7 of the way things will be one day. In the meantime, as we look at our world, we see that there is still much work to be done. There are still nations where the gospel has not yet been preached. There are still tribes and peoples who have no access to the truth of Scripture. There are still languages that have not spoken the name of Jesus. Perhaps the Lord will use this global perspective to raise up folks from our church family who will obey the Lord’s Great Commission and take the gospel to the unreached populations of this world.

John describes this multitude further in the rest of verse 9. This great crowd stood before God’s heavenly throne and in the presence of Christ the Lamb. Here in 7:9, the multitude is described as being “wearing white robes” and holding “palm branches in their hands.” The book of Revelation is filled with symbolism, so we need to stop and consider what these two descriptions represent.

You might guess what the palm branches are for. Just like the scene when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, so too is this crowd gathered before the throne, waving palm branches in celebration. Just as the Jerusalem crowd shouted “Hosanna!” to Jesus, the one they hoped would be their savior and king, so too does the heavenly multitude rejoice in what God has done through King Jesus at the cross.

Against the green of the palm branches, John saw that the great crowd of people was dressed in white robes. We should picture something more like a toga than a bathrobe. But picture these robes as dazzling white. It’s the “after” picture we might see in an ad for a powerful new laundry detergent. These robes have been washed, but not with Clorox Bleach.

Notice what one of the angelic creatures in heaven says in verse 14 about these robes. The wearers have washed their robes in “the blood of the Lamb.” Obviously, this must be symbolic language. Their robes aren’t stained red with Jesus’s blood; we’re told that they have been made pure white. It’s a picture of purity, the removal of the stain of sin, and the cleansing work of Christ at the cross.

Also in verse 14, the angel explains to John that this vast multinational group of men and women has come out of something he refers to as “the great tribulation.” There are a couple of

ways to understand what this means, but I understand it to mean that the Lord will preserve his people to the end, even as they experience suffering in this world. In particular, this “tribulation” that they come out of is a pressure to compromise their faith in Christ. Some will experience much suffering, and others less.

Scripture often tells us that every believer should expect to know tribulation. Jesus said to his disciples,

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33, NIV).

Standing around the throne, in the presence of God, this multitude of believers would experience the comfort of being in the Lord’s presence for eternity. Take a look at the last few verses of this chapter.

“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.’” (Revelation 7:15-17, NIV).

In heaven, in the presence of the Lord, all suffering, pain, and sorrow come to an end. God’s people will lack nothing, and Christ the Lamb will care for his flock as the Good Shepherd.

In other words, John’s vision gives us a **grand perspective: We see Jesus’s disciples standing together in God’s presence.**

Imagine what comfort this perspective might have brought those living in John’s day who were suffering or experiencing tribulation as they were trying to live out their faith in Christ. From their perspective, the finish line looked a long way off. But this vision that John wrote about brought them courage and confidence. Not self-confidence, but confidence in the work of Christ. They could stand assured that, having been washed in the blood of the Lamb, they would be kept safe and preserved as the church until the end.

One day, this is where we who are in Christ will be standing. We’ll be standing around the throne in the presence of God, beholding his glory. We’ll be standing before the Lamb of God who was slain for us and who has taken away our sin. We’ll be standing together with a countless number of brothers and sisters in Christ from all over the world. And together we will be rejoicing in worship. Look back at verse 9 again.

“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!" (Revelation 7:9-12, NIV).

We've been trying to imagine what this scene will look like, but take a minute and try to imagine what this might *sound* like. It is estimated that there are about 7,100 living languages in the world today. In the scene that John describes, we are told that the great multitude in heaven expresses their praise in unison, "[crying] out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'" Voices from each one of those 7,100 languages will one day join together to glorify our God for what he has done. They will sing of his mercy and his grace. They will praise him for the extent of his love. This will not be limited to just one nation, but offered by people "from every nation, tribe, people and language."

Maybe you've been fortunate enough to have heard a preview of what this will be like. Have you ever worshiped with others who don't share your native tongue? I can remember singing a familiar worship tune along with French-speaking believers in Montreal, Canada. I've played guitar and sung 'Holy Is the Lord' and 'Blessed Be Your Name' with other believers in India. I've listened to Christians from other cultures sing praise with words that I didn't understand, yet communicate a love for Christ that didn't require translation.

But we won't be the only ones singing in heaven. In addition to the praise coming from the great multitude, John tells us that he saw angels joining with the crowd in worship. Notice in verse 11 that all of the angels are a part of this chorus. *All* of them. So in addition to an uncountable number of human beings glorifying God together, we have the entire angelic realm adding their amen and singing,

"Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" (Rev. 7:12, NIV).

I wonder if we will ever get tired of all this singing? I don't think so. In verse 15, we read that the great multitude of worshipers continually "serve [God] day and night in his temple." That word "serve" could also be translated as "worship" and is the same one that the Apostle Paul used in Romans 12:1 when he wrote,

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

Day and night, we will stand in God's presence, serving him in worship, and singing his praise.

John's vision gives us a **glorious perspective: We see Jesus's disciples worshipping together before the throne of God.**

There is a great book on the subject of missions written by pastor and author John Piper entitled 'Let the Nations Be Glad!' In the opening lines of this book, Piper writes,

"Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever. Worship, therefore, is the fuel and goal in missions. It's the goal of missions because in missions we simply aim to bring the nations into the white-hot enjoyment of God's glory. The goal of missions is the gladness of the peoples in the greatness of God."

Talk about perspective! We are not merely looking to see more people converted in this world. We're not merely focused on expanding the reach of the gospel to unreached peoples. We are engaged in a mission of making disciples, disciples who will one day stand around the throne and stand before the Lamb and will sing,

"Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (7:10).

As Piper says,

"The goal of missions is the gladness of the peoples in the greatness of God."

I hope from looking at this passage together that John's vision of heaven has given you a better perspective when it comes to missions. I hope that it gave you more of a *global* perspective as we anticipate gathering together with the church "from every nation, tribe, people, and language." I hope this vision gave you more of a *grand* perspective as you reflect on how good it will be to stand together celebrating the victory of Christ in the presence of God. And I hope that by looking at these verses that you gain that *glorious* perspective of the saints and the angels lifting up their praise to God day and night in worship. May the Lord continue to grant us perspective as we commit together to the mission of making disciples of all nations.