

Revelation 7:9-17

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Persecuted Nigerian Pastor Praises God

The Nigerian city of Jos sits on Africa's great fault line between the Muslim north and Christian, and thus has faced terrible things in recent years. A Nigerian Baptist church was attacked by Muslim extremists who burnt the church building and the house of the church's leader, Pastor Sunday Gomna. On the second Sunday after the violent outbreak, when the people of that Baptist church returned for worship, they gathered in a little mud wall community center about one kilometer from the burnt church.

Pastor Gomna stood up and offered some beautiful words of gratitude. He said, 'First, I am grateful that no one in my church killed anyone.' Apparently, during the chaos of the attacks, Pastor Sunday had gone around the community and some of the Muslim people said, "Pastor, thank you for the way you taught your people. 'Your people helped to protect us.'" So Pastor Sunday was proud that his people did not kill any Muslims.

"Second," he said, "I am grateful that they did not burn my church." Everyone looked at Pastor Sunday with disbelief. After all, everyone was meeting in a small, uncomfortable Mud hut had been burnt to the ground. But Pastor Sunday continued: "Inasmuch as no church member died during this crisis, they did not burn our church. They only burned the building. We can rebuild the building but we could not bring back to life any of our members. So I am grateful that they did not burn my church."

He continued, "Third, I am grateful that they burned my house as well. If they had burned your house and not my house, how would I have known how to serve you as pastor? However, because they burned my house and all my possessions, I know what you are experiencing and I will be able to be a better pastor to you. So I am grateful that they burned my house as well."¹

Wow! That is all I can say to that story. But you know what? I have read other stories that were similar.

Today, I want us to turn to Revelation 7:9-17 and let's look at a passage giving us a picture of worship in Heaven. I have one theme and that is *Worship in Heaven*. I have two applications:

- 1) Worship God in humility and unity as we see in this picture of Heaven, we may be there.
- 2) Be encouraged, God does not forget what we do for Him (also Hebrews 6:10), we see in this passage martyrs rewarded by being given the opportunity to serve in God's throne room for eternity.

Turn with me to Rev. 7:9-17:

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:

¹ Mark Meynell, "What to say when they burn down your house and church," *Quearentia blog* (10-21-13); source: David Smith, *The Kindness of God* (InterVarsity Press, 2013)

*“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,¹² 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.’”

- I. Worship God in humility and unity as we see in this picture of Heaven, we may be there. I notice this from verses 9-12.
 - a. First let's notice unity.
 - b. Here we see a picture of worship in Heaven. This is sometime during the end times. This is likely before the New Jerusalem comes down out of Heaven.
 - c. Verse 9 begins to describe a great crowd. No one was able to count this crowd.
 - d. Someone joked that John could not count this large crowd but if a Baptist evangelist was there, he would find a way.
 - e. The text says it is a large crowd.
 - f. Every nation, tribe, people and tongue are in this crowd. This is John's way of saying that every people group from the world is in this crowd.
 - g. Who are these people? The IVP Bible Backgrounds Commentary reads: *Some scholars have suggested that these multitudes are the martyrs or martyr church of 6:11, viewed from another perspective. “Innumerable” meant that the crowd was huge, too many to count—not infinite (3 Maccabees 4:17; it could also represent a*

number so great that it could be pictured as the sands of the sea in number, as in Judith 2:20).

I like what John MacArthur shares: *And then he says, "Behold," which puts exclamation in it. It's a startling vision, it's a shocking vision. Now remember, by the time John was on the isle of Patmos in his old age in say 96 A.D. and this is thirty years after the last real apostolic action. And he's really alone, as it were, now in receiving revelation that late in the century, but that time he knows Gentile churches have been established all over everywhere. He knows that Asia Minor has been evangelized by the Apostle Paul. He knows that Timothy and Titus have been working in their respective areas and there have been others who have evangelized Gentiles. So he knows that Gentiles are going to come to Christ. He knows that. But what he sees here is way beyond what he could even imagine, for the most part, it should be obvious to you that the Gentile churches were not large. They were beleaguered in many ways and for all intents and purposes the Gentile churches that we know in the biblical sense that existed in Asia Minor have, for the most part, passed out of existence. There is nothing left of the testimony today in most cases.*

And so they were small and beleaguered and persecuted and to see a massive Gentile multitude singing salvation to our God was a very shocking experience. Now this is different than the one hundred and forty-four thousand...

h. Unity: what is uniting them? Worshipping our Savior is uniting them, we'll get to that.

i. So, one day Martin Luther King Jr. shared the following words:

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed - we hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state, sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification; one day right there in Alabama little black boys and little black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.²

Another illustration:

God is no respecter of persons, especially when it comes to the gifts of the Spirit. For an example from recent church history, consider the beginning of the Pentecostal movement at the turn of the twentieth century. In the decade prior to 1906, lynchings of African Americans in America had skyrocketed. It is estimated that well over one thousand blacks, mainly men, were lynched—hanged, shot or sometimes buried alive—in the United States. Millions of people in the United States had joined the Ku Klux Klan.

In 1906, the Spirit of God was poured out in a powerful revival in Los Angeles that has come to be known as the Azusa Street Revival. Under the leadership of an African American man, William Seymour, tens of thousands of people from all over the world and all walks of life—rich, poor, men, women, Americans,

² <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/3170387.stm>

non-Americans, black, white, Asian, Latino— came by car, by horse and buggy, by train and by boat. They all encountered the Spirit. In a year of lynchings, blacks and whites were embracing each other as beloved brothers and sisters in Christ. Frank Bartleman, a historian of the Azusa Street Revival, said, "The color line is washed away by the blood of Jesus Christ!"³

One more illustration:

Interestingly, of all the songs in the Book of Revelation, not one is a solo. The twenty-four elders sing and cast their crowns before His feet, the united voices of countless angels resound, every living creature in heaven and earth and under the earth and all that is in them are joined in one song. Those who are victorious over the beast are given harps and a song to sing. In every case multitudes of people or angels unite in the same song with absolute unity.⁴

- j. I believe we have come a long way, but I speak only from one point of view, the point of view of a suburban white male. But we have not gone far enough.
- k. We see in this passage that Jesus can bring us together.
- l. God loves all and tribe, tongues and nationalities, all of them will be in Heaven. It is not the color of our skin, but our great Savior. All these groups are worshipping the Savior together.
- m. Verse 9:
- n. Dr. Mulholland shares:
 - i. The church at this point was likely mainly Jewish.
 - ii. 7:9: Palm branches in verse 9: Palm is the flag of Israel [I think at that time]. On Palm Sunday it was a Messianic procession. Look at the coins that were minted during the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-136 CE) they are minted with Palm branches.
 - iii. This is the messianic procession and they are waving the flag of Israel.
 - iv. symbolize the welcoming of a King??? Thinking back to the triumphant entry as well as the Jewish pole of imagery with Maccabeus entering the Temple.
 - v. Lev. 23:40: *On the first day you must take for yourselves branches from majestic trees—palm branches, branches of leafy trees, and willows of the brook—and you must rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days.*
 - vi. Amen means “truly.”
 - vii. If you go back and look at the descriptions of God and the Lamb in chapter 4 and 5 they compare here.
- o. Verse 11 includes the group introduced in Rev. 4:1-9, all standing around the throne:
 - i. Angels
 - ii. Elders
 - iii. 4 living beings or creatures
 - iv. They fell before the Throne and worshipped God.

³ Rich Nathan, *Both-And* (IVP Books, 2013), page 48

⁴ Graham Kendrick. *Leadership*, Vol. 15, no. 2.

- p. Now, notice humility: they cry out with a loud voice saying salvation belongs to the Lord sitting on the throne and to the Lamb.
 - q. I believe this goes back to chapter 5.
 - r. Rev. 5:6
 - s. Rev, 5:8
 - t. Rev. 5:12
 - u. Rev. 5:13
 - v. Rev. 6:1
 - w. Rev. 6:3
 - x. Rev. 6:5
 - y. Rev. 6:7
 - z. Rev. 6:16
 - aa. All the above refer to the Lamb
 - bb. Then we see in verse 12: the angels, all of them, the elders, the four living creatures bow down, faces down before the throne.
 - cc. Verse 12 could be an inclusio, or rather is: it is bracketed by “amen”
 - dd. Notice “amen” at the beginning and the end of the verse.
 - ee. There is great humility in worship.
 - ff. They said:
 - i. Praise
 - ii. Glory
 - iii. Wisdom
 - iv. Thanks
 - v. Honor
 - vi. Power
 - vii. And strength belong to the eternal God.
 - gg. They give God the glory due His name.
 - hh. They are giving back what is God’s.
 - ii. Rev. 5:12 and 14 has a similar expression of worship
- II. But I also talked about these martyrs.
- a. As we look at the next few verses, we see that John is asked who those in the white robes are.
 - b. The elder explains to John that they are martyrs. They died in the great tribulation because of the testimony of Jesus Christ.
 - c. Notice the great detail. They are described with clothes on. They are wearing “white” robes.

- d. This is a likely scene of the intermediate heaven and they are dressed in clothes. This shows physical people in heaven. They are not disembodied spirits.
- e. Dr. Mulholland shares:
- f. John and his readers are already experiencing tribulation: Revelation 1, John was experiencing this.
- g. What is the great tribulation:
- h. Any generation of Christians will have those that experience tribulation at the hands of their fallen Babylon world. When you put them all together this would be the "GREAT" tribulation from beginning to end." John introduces it as this is something he and his readers are experiencing now.
- i. **I believe Dr. Mulholland is making the case that the tribulation period is not a literal 7 years period. It is just another view to consider.**
- j. In the futurist view chapter 4-22 are all in the future.
- k. Verses 15-17:
- l. This is the first time John gets us into the vision of the ultimate consummation of the end beyond fallen Babylon.
- m. Before it was only the priest who could worship the Lord in the Temple. When John wrote that we are a Kingdom and priests (Rev. 1:6 and 5:10) that threw the temple imagery aside a little bit. You had to be born into the priestly family.
- n. In chapter 14 the Lamb standing on Mount Zion, the Lamb is standing where the Temple is, but you get to chapter 21 and there is no Temple.
- o. Their robes are washed in the blood of the Lamb, in Jesus' blood.
- p. Let's re-read verses 15-17:
*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.'"*
- q. God does not forget what we go through for Him. In this case these people were martyred in the great tribulation and God rewarded them.
- r. What was the reward?
- s. The reward was worship.
- t. They went through death, martyrdom for God and He rewards them with worship. Now, some of us may not think that is so awesome. Think about this.
- u. They are given the privilege to worship God day and night. That is something I must get excited about.

- v. But, more than that: they are given the privilege to serve in God's Temple.
- w. That is what this passage says: they are able to witness the awesome presence of God and the Lamb, Jesus, next to the throne. They are able to worship alongside the angels, the elders, the four beasts. They are able to be in the throne room of God.
- x. Historically, it has always been a privilege to serve in the presence of a king, so what about the King of Kings.
- y. There was a movie made a year ago about a butler. It was a good movie, called "The Butler." The movie was about an African American man who served presidents in the Whitehouse. I want to say that he served from Johnson to George W. Bush. What a privilege that would be.
- z. These martyrs are remembered by God and God places them in His throne room to worship.
- aa. I think this has to be too exciting to imagine.
- bb. Lastly, about verse 17, the IVP BBC of the NT shares: This verse alludes to Isaiah 25:8 (in the context of the messianic banquet at the resurrection at the end of the age) and 49:10 (in the age to come

Close:

Worship, is your desire to worship God? As I look at these passages I must apply them and ask God to fix my attitude and make me desire Him more.

So, what is your focus on life? Remember the story I told at the beginning of this message? I told the story of a Nigerian Pastor who had his church and house burned down, yet praised God in church. That is a different focus on life than say the following:

You Can't Just Sit There

Several years ago, I heard the story of Larry Walters, a 33-year-old man who decided he wanted to see his neighborhood from a new perspective.

He went down to the local army surplus store one morning and bought 42 used weather balloons. That afternoon he strapped himself into a lawn chair, to which several of his friends tied the now helium-filled balloons. He took along a six-pack of beer, a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich, and a BB gun, figuring he could shoot the balloons one at a time when he was ready to land.

Walters, who assumed the balloons would lift him about 100 feet in the air, was caught off guard when the chair soared more than 16,000 feet into the sky--smack into the middle of the air traffic pattern at Los Angeles International Airport. He had just begun shooting the balloons when he lost his grip on his pellet gun, and it dropped from his hands. He stayed airborne for more than two hours.

Soon after he was safely grounded and cited by the police, reporters asked him three questions:

"Were you scared?"

"Yes."

"Would you do it again?"

"No."

"Why did you do it?"

"Because," he said, "you can't just sit there."

His answer caught my interest. I pondered that story and its implications for several months. Then, as I was preparing a sermon, "The Crisis Called Christmas," my thoughts came together. I used the Walters story in the introduction to set the stage for the idea that each of the birth narratives called for a response--or reaction--from its participants. When it comes to God's intervention in our lives, we can't just sit there.⁵

So, again, where are you at? Are you bored spiritually? Look at this Bible passage of worship in eternity and tell me as a Christ follower how this whole idea cannot not pump you up and get you excited about worship.

- 1) Worship God in humility and unity as we see in this picture of Heaven, we may be there.
- 2) Be encouraged, God does not forget what we do for Him (also Hebrews 6:10), we see in this passage martyrs rewarded by being given the opportunity to serve in God's throne room for eternity.

These people, too many to count, went to their graces for Jesus. Then on the other side of death, here they are worshipping the Lord.

Jesus is worthy, He was slain for us, the Bible models worship for now and eternity. Worship Him today and this week.

⁵ Gary Gonzales, *Elim Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Leadership, Vol. 14, no. 3.*