

The Church Indestructible

Our New Testament scripture reading today is Revelation 7:9-17. *Revelation* is not a sequential presentation of future events, but is rather a poetic and symbolic portrayal of God's delivering his church toward our arrival at the City of God. Just prior to the final outbreak of judgment in chapter 8 is a great interlude. This parenthesis is God's revelation of assurance of sustaining grace for God's people in these last days. It's a picture of the Church Indestructible.

Follow as I read **Revelation 7:9-17**:

⁹ After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

"Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

¹¹ And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² singing,

*"Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might*

be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" ¹⁴ I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

*¹⁵ For this reason they are before the throne of God,
and worship him day and night within his temple,
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.*

*¹⁶ They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;*

*¹⁷ for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."*

Following our worship service today will be a potluck lunch, which will feature a report on the Waldensian Church by the Ishikawas, our newest members. This small church movement began as a pre-Reformation church in 12th Century Europe, and stands today as a monument to a church indestructible, standing against the tide of ecclesiastical persecution and cultural oppression. In fact, because of this small church's survival amidst horrific persecution, they were called "the invincibles."

We're all aware that in today's worldwide church, there's great opposition and even overt persecution of those who faithfully follow Christ. One leader of a church in a well-known country of persecution stated, "All those who are committed to follow after Jesus, they have to be ready to pay a high price for their commitment to their calling. Pray for the church, that the church will be even more bold. And, even if there are mighty waters flowing over us, the Lord remains as the King and the Ruler."

Revelation 7 pictures a church numbering 144,000 (4), and also a church that no one can count (9). These both are portraits of the same people of God, and as apocalyptic symbols, they are like two sides of the same coin. Numerology, or the symbolic use of numbers, is an important feature in apocalyptic literature. Cults like the Jehovah's Witnesses, however, take this number literally and claim only 144,000 of them will go to heaven. But this symbolic number represents the full and complete number of God's chosen people (4); followed by the picture of "*a great multitude that no one could count*," known only to God (2 Timothy 2:19).

This was the promise of God to Abraham and the other Patriarchs, that they would be the fathers of a people no one could count (Genesis 15:5, etc.). Perhaps this image should remind us that, even when we feel weak and alone, God has his indestructible people. God's people will gather around the throne and forever sing the song of the redeemed. As the Israelites were delivered from the pharaoh by the shedding of the blood of the Passover lambs, so we're redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. While the plagues of Egypt harmed the Egyptians, God's people were spared. So we too will be delivered even through trials and even through "the great ordeal" (14).

Redemption is not only our final redemption, but is God's gracious work in our lives even now, to bring about our deliverance from the evil intents of our real enemy, the devil. We're God's "being redeemed people," who understand that Psalm 91, for example, doesn't mean we're sheltered from temporal troubles or even mortal death, but that God shields our faith from damage. He'll not allow anything to harm our relationship with him, and will transform (i.e., redeem) our suffering into patient endurance and the strengthening of our character (Romans 5:3-4).

What a beautiful picture of people from every "nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages standing before the throne" (9)! In heaven there'll be representatives from every race, culture, language, color, and nationality. God will be eternally worshiped by representatives from the 6,912 known languages of the world. God will forever be glorified through the enriched cultural diversity and spiritual unity of his people from all over the globe. And these facts remind us of the great unfinished missionary task, and the opportunity of our OGHS offering, to make Christ known, as he gathers to himself representatives from all these groups. This world-wide offering addresses desperate needs that contribute to social and political unrest, including providing for refugees from

lands of persecution. Our praying and giving will allow a world-wide diversity to gather around the throne. I always thought of our congregation in Brussels, Belgium, comprised of believers from about 50 different countries, from churches of all denominations, as a foretaste of heaven.

There's the "apocryphal" story of one of the angels welcoming and introducing a group of newcomers to their new home in heaven. They were having a glorious time checking out the heavenly landscape, but when they reached a certain neighborhood of heaven the angel told the crowd with him to be very quiet as they were to pass this area. He whispered, "Be very quiet as we tiptoe past this building. The Baptists live here, and they think they're the only ones up here!"

We may be surprised who is with us in heaven. If you have had any prejudice against any category of people, look out! Guess who your heavenly neighbor's likely to be! Or, if you've avoided a particular brother or sister, perhaps because of a failure to reconcile, then look out again! The New Heaven and Earth will be a very universal and level place! No cultural or social tiers in heaven. The ground in heaven will be like the ground at the foot of the cross—very level!

The indestructible church is made up of conquerors (11-17). The full number of the redeemed is safely brought through trials, and is now ready to face even the "great ordeal." The great multitude shouts and sings before the throne (10). The first Palm Sunday, Jesus rode into the city of Jerusalem for that final week that ended with his cross and resurrection. He was greeted by the crowd that, John says, laid palm branches before him as he entered the city. They also praised him as Savior, proclaiming far more than they understood. That day he entered as the lowly Jesus, riding on a borrowed donkey. In our text, he's the Lamb, surrounded on his throne by the multitude wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands. According to Matthew's account of Palm Sunday, children were there as part of the crowd, since they were always included in the festivals (21:15-16).

Robert Coleman tells of a little girl, who went to the doctor to undergo a painful medical procedure, and the doctor told her it would be OK to cry, and he would certainly understand if she did. "Doctor, if it's just the same with you, I think I'd rather sing," and Coleman said that's exactly what she did. She sang to the top of her lungs during the entire procedure, one that usually reduces adults to groans and tears.

In the midst of its darkest hours the church indestructible is found standing before the throne (9). In fact, Jesus Christ in his Apocalypse said "Those who *stand* firm to the end will be saved" (Mark 13:13, NIV).

Our text is part of a parenthetical interlude in the midst of outbreaks of judgment and bewildering circumstances upon the world. These verses portray the fact

that even the persecuted church is seated with Christ in the heavenly places and is engaging in heavenly worship (Ephesians 2:6).

The writer Annie Dillard says the key theological question we can raise in troubling times is, "What in the Sam Hill is going on, anyway?" Revelation is a message from Christ to tell us that he's in charge, even if we can't understand or easily accept what's going on. But God's people will be found standing, whatever the tide of opposition or level of suffering or persecution.

Singer John Fisher says that in the light of the fact that the Gallup poll reports 60 million Americans claim to be Christians, "I wonder what would happen if someone put a gun to the head of these 60,000,000, and said 'renounce Christ or I blow your head off.' The 60 million number would be a more dramatic decrease than when Gideon's troops were pared down. In fact," says Fisher, "a lot of the 60 million would defect from the ranks of the faith if the gunman just threatened to take away their TV sets!" The church indestructible is a church that will stand before the throne in the face of trials and threats, and will sing in the midst of pain and till death itself.

In his book on Revelation, Billy Graham says, "My wife was born and raised as the daughter of missionary parents in China. She witnessed firsthand how God prepared His church there during times of trouble to withstand the even greater troubled times ahead. And the Christians in China not only survived the years of crises and conflict; they have multiplied and grown stronger under the difficult times of restrictive laws and suffering. So, in the good news and in the bad," says Graham, "there is great hope for the future. Through John's visions on the island of Patmos we are given signposts that will lead us all along our way" (39).

Followers of Christ conquer not by our power, force nor ability. The church conquers by sharing with Jesus Christ the way of the cross, which is the way he conquered. Remember, he is the Lamb slain who now rules upon his throne. We win Kingdom battles and warfare by surrender to the way of the cross.

In Belgium there resides a Rwandan named Paul Rusesabagina, whose story of the heroic rescue of over 1200 Rwandans during the 1994 genocide was portrayed in the blockbuster film, "Hotel Rwanda." To secure the safety of hundreds of refugees boarded in a luxurious Belgian Sabena-owned hotel, Rusesabagina had to repeatedly bribe the corrupt Hutu General Bizimungu. In his last desperate attempt to secure the general's protection of the hotel, Rusesabagina threatened the general that if he didn't protect the hotel, the Hutu general would be condemned by the world for war crimes against humanity. In a desperate rage, the ruthless general grabbed the much smaller hotel manager by the throat, crying, "I'll kill you first!" Rusesabagina replied, "You will need me to be your only witness that you acted in behalf of these people in my hotel. So, you would be crazy to kill me. But go ahead and kill me if you want. I'm already as good as dead"

When we are “as good as dead,” and have died to ourselves and our own self-preservation, we are free to live for Christ and even to face victoriously our mortal death. Martyr means witness, and the word martyr became synonymous with those who witnessed unto death. If Christ is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31). God’s faithful witnesses do not need to fear death because we’ve already died with Christ to the curse and sting of death. And there’s special glory in heaven for those who witness unto death, i.e., who die as martyrs for the faith.

The Lamb who was slain now becomes the Shepherd (17). He completely understands his sheep. He became one of us in his incarnation. Now he shepherds us, even through our trials. He will even permit our suffering, if that will add to our good and to his glory. That’s why the apostles in Acts 5:41 rejoiced when they were beaten. They rejoiced to be considered worthy to suffer for Jesus’ name. They were prepared by Jesus Christ, the Lamb and Good Shepherd, for their hour of tribulation. The Lamb, the Shepherd, is preparing us for our time of tribulation, perhaps even the “great ordeal.” And nobody knows when his or her greatest trial will come. For some, you have already endured perhaps the greatest test of your life. As Scripture makes abundantly clear, times of tribulation and suffering are days when God works to purify his church. In those days, it will no longer be personally and politically advantageous to be a member of the church, because it will be a persecuted church. Yet it also will be the Indestructible Church, just like the Waldensian church of old.

Church buildings have been and will continue to be destroyed, but the church of the Lord Jesus Christ is indestructible. The real threat to the church is not from without, because, as Tertullian said in the second century during the height of the church’s persecution, “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” The power and grace of Christ rests on those who witness unto death, and their testimony goes out to the ends of the earth to encourage the faith of others. The greater threat is inside the church, with temptations to abandon the true gospel, and to lose vigilance for the truth and zeal for our mission. Our greatest struggle will be against complacency and the seductive power of materialism and self-centered indulgence and indifference.

Our calling is to follow the Lamb wherever he goes (14:4), and to be his faithful, indestructible church, whatever the cost.