

10.16.22 The Crescendo of the Bible: The End & the Beginning Rev. 7:9-17

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Today we finish a 66-week journey through the Bible that began in July of 2021. We've gone through the books of the Law, the Historical books, Wisdom literature, Major and Minor Prophets, the Gospels, Acts, Letters, and Epistles and today we finish with the book of Revelation. Revelation is a type of literature that's called apocalyptic, it's meant to reveal things that may not be otherwise known. Because the message was intended for people under stress and often in danger from enemies, apocalyptic writers used coded language, metaphors, and allusions, which only the intended audience could interpret properly. For example, if I said last Sunday the Saints fended off the Seahawks, and the Cowboys corralled the Rams, insiders who know can interpret that news correctly while others can only speculate and guess what I'm talking about. That's the way Revelation is written. Unfortunately, this same style of writing that confused the Roman authorities has also confused many Christians through the centuries.

If you've ever been confused by reading the Book of Revelation, you're not alone. A dragon with seven heads... A beast rising out of the water... Death riding a pale horse... Brimstone and blood falling on the earth... The mark of the beast: 666... There's definitely a lot to take in. But don't let the symbolism and the language be a stumbling block on your journey to understanding this unique book. There is also blessing, comfort, and hope to be found in its pages.

The book of Revelation has been misunderstood and misinterpreted ever since it was written. The difficulty of interpreting and understanding Revelation is evidenced by the fact that it's the only New Testament book on which John Calvin didn't write a commentary, but Revelation plays a significant role in the Bible. The Revelation to John is a series of **visions for the church in crisis** at the end of the first century. The first-century church was confronted by the tremendous power of the Roman Empire. In a period of history marked by violence, materialism, and selfishness, a gifted, courageous disciple recorded visions that sustained his Christian contemporaries and have brought assurance to the Christian church

ever since.

This morning I want to share a passage from Revelation that I appreciate, it's a brief vision of heaven. Lots of folks have ideas about heaven and the soul, even those making commercials. One ad says, *They say the soul lives on. And it does.* That was an ad for a car. Another, *This just in: Apparently heaven does exist.* These words appear next to pictures of three hamburgers. Another ad said in large letters, *Bathrooms made for the soul.* The Bible's vision of heaven is a little more substantial than a car, a burger, and a nice bathroom.

The fact that corporations seek to exploit the human hope for heaven and eternal life to sell their products tells us that the ancient human yearning to believe in a life beyond this life is as strong as ever. It's amazing how many songs mention heaven. In the mid 1930's, Fred Astaire sang to Ginger Rogers in the movie Top Hat, *"Heaven, I'm in heaven, and my heart beats so that I can hardly speak; and I seem to find the happiness I seek, when we're out together dancing, cheek to cheek."* In 1987, Belinda Carlisle sang, *"They say in heaven love comes first."* Los Lonely Boys sang in their 2003 song, *Heaven,* *"I've been locked up way too long in this crazy world How far is heaven? And I just keep on prayin', Lord, and just keep on livin' How far is heaven? Yeah, Lord, can you tell me? How far is heaven? (Cause I just gotta to show some faith).* There's also the quartet classic, *"Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die."*

Listen to John's vision from Revelation 7 and be ready to participate:
 "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. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,
All: "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" 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,

All: “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.”

These verses present a vision of heaven, and they describe the hope we have as Christians. I'd like to note three things about John's vision of heaven.

Heaven is Inclusive, Worshipful, and Comforting.

Heaven is Inclusive. John sees a multitude so great he can't count them. These people are from all over the world from every nation and language. We need to remember we're part of a global family of God, and we have sisters and brothers all over the world of every skin color and language and culture, many of them in far more difficult circumstances than we face in the US. Medical missionaries like Bill and Ann Clemmer and other Global servants involved in seeking to deliver people from human trafficking go into situations most of us would feel the urge to flee from.

The people in the huge crowd John sees in heaven are robed in white and hold palm branches. In antiquity, the palm branch was a symbol of victory. When we hear palm branches, we're reminded of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and his death on the cross that our sins might be forgiven. Trust in Christ is the way into heaven. One of the elders tells John that “*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.*” This is a way of saying that they're victorious because their

sins are covered by the sacrifice of the Lamb of God who is Jesus. The focus is on what Jesus has done for all God's people. Back in the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus told the disciples that he had, "*other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also so there will be one flock, one shepherd.*" This word of Jesus is fulfilled in John's vision of heaven. Too often Christians think of the church in terms of their local congregation or even the church in their nation, rather than as an international community of more than a billion people with a history that stretches back almost 2,000 years. John was giving the seven small struggling relatively new congregations to which he was writing a broader vision of the church to which they belonged. That church is inclusive of all kinds of people from everywhere. **In Revelation, we see the inclusiveness of heaven.**

The second thing we learn about heaven is that **it's Worshipful. We hear the worship in heaven** in verses 10-12: people are crying out in praise to God, falling on their faces in humility before God, and singing to God. Many pop culture notions of heaven have to do with a place where things are focused on you – in John's vision of heaven the focus is on God, and everyone is worshiping the Lord in praise and prayer and song. I've been at Fenway Park when tens of thousands of people were making as much noise as they possibly could. I've been at concerts where a band was playing incredibly loud music and thousands of people were singing at the top of their lungs – I can't comprehend the sound of more people than I could count singing together with loud voices - "*Salvation belongs to our **God** who is seated **on the throne**, and to **the Lamb!***"

From the beginning of the Bible, we've seen that worship is what human beings were created for –our purpose in life is to worship God. God focused worship also benefits us significantly – here are **12 benefits of worship**:
 Worship dispels loneliness – and helps us feel part of a larger community – which is a key component to living longer and healthier.
 Worship brings hope when life is hard – and life is often hard.
 Worship counters self-centeredness and reminds us that life is not all about us.

Worship reminds us of important values we may forget.

Worship strengthens our courage.

Worship brings us a sense of forgiveness.

Worship gives us the opportunity to express praise and thanksgiving.

Worship renews our faith when it's weakening.

Worship empowers creativity – think of the painting, sculpture, stained glass, music, writing and architecture that have been inspired by the worship of God.

Worship is a form of corporate prayer that brings positive change to people.

Worship calls us out of who *we are* to *who we may yet become* with God's help.

Worship is a transcendent experience that helps us stand apart from our lives and see reality more clearly.

All these aspects of worship are part of preparing us for worship in heaven. If John's correct, nobody's going to have any problem hearing worship in heaven.

John's vision of heaven is Inclusive, Worshipful, and Comforting.

The people who have conquered, who have held onto the faith through the great ordeal, through persecution, trial, and hardship will receive the Comfort of the Lamb of God. In heaven we will **give our worship** and **receive God's comfort**.

The promises of Psalm 121 and Psalm 23 will be realized in heaven. We will hunger and thirst no more – no one will be starving; all will be satisfied. The Lamb will be our Shepherd. God will wipe away every tear from our eye. Heaven is a place where there will be no more tears from mourning, grief, or persecution.

Author Mitch Albom wrote a bestselling novel, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*. In an interview with Barbara Walters he said, "*There's one thing I would say about heaven. **If you believe that there's a heaven, your life here on Earth is different.** You may believe that you're gonna see your loved ones again. So the grief that you had after they're gone isn't as strong. You may believe that you'll have to answer for your actions. So the way you behave here on Earth is changed. So in a certain way, just believing in the idea of heaven is heavenly in and of itself.*" While Albom didn't try to write a Biblical view of heaven, he's correct that **if we believe there's a heaven our life here on earth will be different in**

every way. Every week in worship, perhaps on our own each day, we pray the Lord's Prayer that says, "Our Father, who art in **heaven**, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, **thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.**" The Lord's Prayer opens and closes by focusing on God.

The more we focus on God in heaven, the more inspired we are on earth.

Max Lucado relates the story of a sociologist who *"accompanied a group of mountain climbers on an expedition. Among other things, he observed a direct correlation between cloud cover and contentment. When there was no cloud cover and the peak was in view, the climbers were energetic and cooperative. When the gray clouds eclipsed the view of the mountaintop, though, the climbers were sullen and selfish."* When we stop looking at God's vision of heaven our life on earth will change for the worse.

The Bible begins in Genesis with creation and ends with a new creation at the end of Revelation. The Bible begins in a garden and ends in a city (New Jerusalem). The Bible begins with human beings disobeying God by focusing on themselves and hiding in shame from God.

The Bible ends with people focused on worshiping God, and Jesus, in gratitude and praise. Heaven is a place of love, belonging, redemption and hope.

We can't possibly know all there is to know about heaven – John is attempting to describe the indescribable. I don't claim to know all there is to know about heaven, but I do know this – if you want to go there, then believe Jesus is the Son of God who died on the cross that your sins may be forgiven, and that God raised him from the dead. Believe that Christ wants you to live as he taught his followers to live – as his loving, humble, generous, merciful, compassionate, serving people. Share with others this life changing good news.

Heaven is a place where God's children **from every nation, from all tribes, peoples, and languages** will be worshiping God and the Lamb on the throne and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. **Heaven will be inclusive, worshipful, and comforting.**

Revelation 21:3-7 declares, "3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne

saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes. **Death** will be no more; **mourning** and **crying** and **pain** will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, “**See, I am making all things new.**” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” 6 Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. 7 **Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.**”

God’s ultimate intention from the beginning of the Bible to the end is eternal relationship with as many people as possible. I hope and pray you will be one of them.

As the old hymn says, “When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be, when we all see Jesus, we’ll sing and shout the victory.”

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. As we conclude our series on the Bible, do you have a book that you’d call a favorite? Which is it and why?
2. When you think of or envision heaven, what comes to mind? What do you see and hear? Who do you see?
3. Why do John, and other apocalyptic writers, commonly use coded language, metaphors, and allusions in communicating their message? What purpose does it serve?
4. According to Revelation 7:9-17 who will be present in heaven? Where will they be from? What does that tell us?
5. How does John describe worship in heaven? What are some of the images and words he uses? What does it sound like?
6. God focused worship benefits us significantly – the sermon mentions 12 benefits of worship, which of them do you find particularly helpful or

hopeful?

7. What is comforting about John's vision of heaven? See Revelation 21:3-7 for example.