

A Great Multitude

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[0 : 00] Good morning again, welcome to worship this morning. For those of you who I haven't had a chance to meet, I My name's Jeff, I'm one of the pastors here, and I would love to meet you after the service, out on the steps and hear your story and get to know you a little bit better.

As a kid growing up in the late 90s and early 2000s, one of my favorite TV shows was on the Disney Channel. It was called The Jersey, The Jersey Show of Hands.

Has anyone seen this show? A couple, probably 90s kids, 2000s kids. Probably not many of you have seen this. It's about a group of kids who love to play sports.

And one day, this group of teenagers who love to play sports discover an old football jersey up in the attic of one of their houses.

It was a football jersey that belonged to one of the grandfathers of these kids, and they discover that this old football jersey has magical powers. And in every episode, these kids would be encountering some problem of teenage life related to school or friendship or dating or sports.

[1 : 10] And then somewhere along the way, they would put on the jersey, or sometimes even the jersey would find them, and it would transport them into the bodies of professional athletes. They would suddenly become the 49ers quarterback Steve Young playing in the NFL.

Or they would become Dominique Dawes competing in gymnastics in the Olympics. Any number of professional athletes. And somewhere in these experiences of being transported to being a professional sports player, they would learn a truth about life.

They would learn about the value of teamwork or having integrity or how to face their fears. And then finally, that moment would be over, and the jersey would transport them back to their real lives again.

And the rest of the episode, they would be reflecting how their experience as Steve Young or as Dominique Dawes had taught them something about how to persevere.

about how to persevere through the problem and the challenges that they were facing. And I know that it's an imperfect illustration, but something like this is happening in the book of Revelation.

[2 : 22] The book of Revelation was written by the apostle John to a group of churches in first century Asia Minor, many of whom were experiencing very real hardship and persecution and suffering.

And in this book, we see over and over again that John is transported. He's transported across space and time through a series of visions across the entirety of the book.

And the purpose of these visions is something like what the jersey did. It's meant to tell the truth. It's meant to tell the truth about reality in a way that encourages perseverance for the church, to encourage these embattled churches in Asia Minor in the first century, to persevere in their own generation and faithful living and gospel witness.

And it's meant to do the same for us. And over the course of the Easter season, we've been journeying through Revelation in the lectionary. A few weeks ago, we saw that in Revelation chapter one, we saw this vision of Jesus holding the seven lampstands and the seven stars of the churches.

Last week in Revelation five, we saw this vision of Jesus who is at once the lamb who was slain and the lion of the tribe of Judah.

[3 : 43] And in our text this morning, in Revelation chapter seven, John receives another vision. And it's this vision of this great multitude. And so that's what we're gonna look at this morning, who this great multitude is and how this multitude encourages us to persevere in our own generation is what we're gonna look at this morning.

We're gonna see from Revelation seven, we're gonna see a multi-ethnic multitude, a triumphant multitude, and a secure multitude.

A multi-ethnic multitude, a triumphant multitude, and a secure multitude. So first of all, a multi-ethnic multitude. One of the questions that faces anybody who reads this section of Revelation chapter seven is what John's seeing, is what he is seeing one group or is it two groups?

In verses four through eight, John hears a number. And the number that he hears is 144,000 from the tribe of Israel, from the various tribes of Israel.

But then in verse nine, he sees, he sees a great multitude that no one could count from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

[4 : 58] And so we have to ask ourselves, which is it? Is this one group of people or is this two groups of people? And as you can imagine, scholars have proposed various theories across the centuries.

Those within Christendom and those outside of Christendom. So Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, you may know that Jehovah's Witnesses actually believe that these 144,000 are a select group of people that will reign with Christ in heaven one day while all other believers have somewhat of a second-class existence on earth.

It's kind of a varsity, junior varsity split going on here. If you're a really great Christian, you'll be numbered among the 144,000. Within Christendom, some Christians have even argued that the 144,000 represent a select group of Jewish evangelists who will witness to Jesus as the Messiah during the period of the Great Tribulation, which is still yet to come.

But I think that neither of these views actually reads Revelation well. Neither of these views best accounts for what's happening and how the symbolic imagery of Revelation is supposed to work on its original audience and on us.

To read this well, all we have to do is remember back to chapter five. When John hears and he sees. In Revelation chapter five, John hears the name of the lion of the tribe of Judah, but then a verse later, he sees who?

[6 : 32] He sees the lamb who was slain, seated on the throne. And what we realize in Revelation five is what John hears and what he sees are one and the same. Jesus is both the lion of the tribe of Judah and the lamb seated on the throne who was slain.

And these two images are two lenses through which we see the same Jesus. And the same thing is happening here. John hears the number of 144,000 and then he sees the great multitude that can't be counted.

But they are one and the same, simply viewed through two different lenses. The 144,000 symbolically represent God's people Israel under the old covenant. The number 12, if you read the Old Testament, or even if you think about Jesus' 12 disciples, number 12 is symbolic of fullness or completeness in the Bible.

And so 144,000 comes from the 12 tribes of Israel times 12,000. And I checked on my calculator this week and it does lead to 144,000.

So you're welcome to check my math. But this is not a statistic. It's not a statistic. It's a symbolic image of the completeness of God's people.

[7 : 50] The people of Israel under the old covenant are one in the same. They are one in the same with the great multitude from every tribe and tongue and people and nation under the new covenant.

And although God is revealing this to John in a new vision, this is nothing new. If you've read the Old Testament, you know that this has been God's plan all along. God told Abraham in Genesis 12 that his family, his descendants will be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

And all over the Old Testament, we read how Israel's mission was meant to be a light to the nations, to all of the peoples of the earth. And so the church is this multi-ethnic fulfillment of these promises.

They are the new Israel in Christ. And so what John sees is a future vision of the full number of God's people from at the end of history, from every era of time and from every nation on earth that will stand before God and who will reign with him forever and ever.

And this future vision is meant to encourage us to persevere in our present mission. This future reality doesn't yet match what is currently the present reality.

[9 : 08] The Joshua Project estimates that there are 7,200 ethnic groups in the world representing over 3 billion people with little to no access to the gospel.

Many of them who live in what's called as the 1040 window. This is the part of the globe stretching from North Africa across the Middle East to parts of Asia.

This is the place where most people in the world have not only not heard of Christ but have little to no access to the gospel. And in our digital and connected world, many of the people who remain unreached are unreached for a reason.

They live in places that are geographically hard to get to. They live in places that are spiritually challenging and they live in places where the political authorities are opposed to the gospel, sometimes even violently.

And so to share Christ with people in these places often takes great risk. And it often involves great difficulty and even opposition.

[10:12] Just as the churches in the first century in Asian minor experienced, in the Roman Empire, experienced risk and opposition and even persecution to share Christ, the same is true of many today who answer the call of God to share Christ with those in unreached and difficult places.

Why should the church, why should the people of God persevere in spreading the gospel in places that are geographically hard to get to, in places that are spiritually challenging, and in places where the political authorities are opposed to the gospel?

Because of the great multitude. Because of the great multitude, God is on a mission to make the good news of the victory of the Lamb known to every tribe and tongue and nation on earth.

And this vision of the multitude in Revelation 7 assures us that this multi-ethnic mission will not fail. It will not fail.

The success rate is 100%. And God has given us the incredible stewardship and privilege and opportunity to join him in his mission to every tribe and tongue and people on earth.

[11:35] This is why as a church we support missionaries all over the world taking the gospel to people in unreached and hard to reach places. This is why we support missionaries working in places like Thailand.

In places like Kazakhstan. It's why we support missionaries who work with Middle Eastern refugees in places like Greece. This is why we give generously to the calls of global missions.

It's why we pray faithfully for the calls of global missions and it's why we go courageously to hard places for the calls of global missions.

We do this because the north star for the mission of the church is the multi-ethnic multitude in Revelation 7 from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

So that's the first thing that we see in Revelation 7 that this multitude that John sees is a multi-ethnic multitude. The second thing that we see as we continue in the passage is that it is a triumphant multitude.

[12:46] It's a triumphant multitude. We saw in chapter 5 last week we saw this vision of the scroll how there's a scroll that reveals God's plan his sovereign plan for all of history that there is only one and there is only one who is able to break the seals and to open the scroll and it is the one who is both the lion of the tribe of Judah and the lamb who was slain.

And then as we move forward in chapter 6 what we begin to see is that the lamb who is the lion begins opening the seals of the book of history.

And as he opens the seals what we begin to see is the reality of a suffering world where the powers of evil are wreaking havoc where there is violence and destruction and famine and death on humanity in general and where the people of God in particular are persecuted and even killed.

and we see this in Revelation 6 verses 9 and 10 when the fifth of seven seals is opened we read this when he opened the fifth seal I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony that they had maintained and they called out in a loud voice how long sovereign Lord holy and true until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood and these are the martyrs of the church they are those who have been killed for their faith in Christ and for their witness to the gospel not only those in the first century in the seven churches in Asia Minor who were killed and martyred under the great persecutions of the Roman Empire but those who continue to be martyred even today Open Doors International is a ministry that supports and creates awareness of the persecuted church around the world and they report that in last year in 2024 that approximately 4,500 Christians across the globe were killed and martyred for their faith and that this number is likely higher since many of these instances go unreported the reality of martyrdom is not an ancient phenomenon it is a present reality for many Christians around the world those who have died for the sake of Christ across history are in the

presence of the Lord and they're crying out to God saying how long how long until you bring justice to our death and defeat the powers of evil once and for all how long is the cry of the martyrs of the church it's also the cry of every Christian who suffers in a fallen world it's the cry of every human being who feels as if justice will never come it's the cry of every person in this room who is suffering how long

God why are you waiting why are you delaying bringing justice to the world and we begin to get an answer in chapter 6 verse 11 it says then each of them was given a white robe and they were told to wait a little longer until the full number of their fellow servants their brothers and sisters were killed just as they had been and this seems a bit surprising perhaps even troubling at first when we read this that God is delaying his justice until the full number of martyrs have been killed until we remember the lamb and we remember that this is exactly how the lamb conquers the powers of evil and sin and death just as the lamb was triumphant through weakness and sacrifice and death so too are those who follow the lamb what the powers of evil do to try to oppose the lamb the lamb uses to conquer the powers of evil the third century church father

[17:18] Tertullian is famous for saying that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church throughout history whenever followers of Christ have given their lives for the gospel what happens the gospel spreads and the church grows and the lamb is victorious and this is what we see in Revelation chapter 7 we see in Revelation chapter 6 the cry of the martyrs and in Revelation 7 we see that this army of martyrs is triumphant and verse 9 they are wearing white robes and they are holding palm branches white robes and palm branches in the ancient world were symbols of a military victory and as this multitude bears the symbols of victory they sing a song of victory to their triumphant king verse 10 they cry out with a loud voice salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne into the lamb and all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God saying amen blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever amen this is a triumphant multitude and in a suffering world where there is real suffering and real injustice where there is violence and destruction and war and famine and chaos and death where followers of Christ are imprisoned and tortured and even killed for the gospel around the world in a world and in our own lives where sometimes it can feel like the powers of evil are winning and sometimes it can feel hopeless this is why the church can persevere this is why the church can persevere amidst opposition and persecution and even martyrdom because the ultimate triumph of the Lamb over the powers of evil is never in doubt in fact he uses what the powers of evil try to do to oppose him to conquer the powers of evil and the power and glory of all earthly empires will eventually fade and will eventually give way to the glory and power of the Lamb and his kingdom the original audience would have heard in their culture and in their time

Caesar and Rome bring you salvation Caesar and Rome bring you blessing Caesar and Rome bring you glory Caesar and Rome bring you wisdom and honor they were false promises then they're false promises now salvation doesn't belong to Rome it doesn't belong to Caesar it doesn't belong to any earthly empire including our own including our own salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb who is seated on the throne blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever Amen so the first thing we see about this multitude is that it is a multi-ethnic multitude the second thing we see is that it is a triumphant multitude and finally the third thing and final thing we see in Revelation 7 is that it is a secure multitude the hard truth of Revelation of all of Revelation but Revelation chapter 6 the hard truth is that the wrath of the Lamb is coming we see at the end of chapter 6 as the sixth seal of the scroll is opened we see a vision of the day of judgment at the end of time

Revelation chapter 6 verses 15 through 17 then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful and everyone slave and free hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains calling to the mountains and the rocks fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb for the great day of their wrath has come and who can stand for some of us perhaps many of us the wrath of God is something that is uncomfortable or perhaps even troubling to think about perhaps this is why some of us cannot possibly believe in the God of the Bible we've dismissed the God of the Bible because we can never believe in a God of wrath it seems irrational it seems unfair it seems opposed to a God of love but think for a second about the people in your life who you love the most who love you

the most friends family loved ones what if the people in your life that you love the most were threatened were harmed even abused what would you feel would you not feel anger would you not feel wrath would you not long for someone to do something about it and to bring justice in the same way

God's wrath and judgment is simply the flip side of his love God's purposes for humanity and for his creation are loving and redemptive they are to heal and restore his creation but as many who have experienced injustice know healing cannot happen without justice the judge of all the earth must punish and remove all evil and cleanse his world from sin to restore it and the question that revelation confronts us with is who can stand who can stand before a God like that who can stand before the wrath of the Lamb when all of us rightly deserve his judgment because of the sin and evil in our hearts that's the hard news of revelation but the good news of revelation is though the wrath of the Lamb is coming the salvation of the Lamb has already come the salvation of the Lamb has already come this is what it's meant by chapter 7 verse 14 when it talks about this multitude it says that they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb that's strange that's confusing how can blood wash something and make it white but the strangeness of this image helps us to see the powerfully good news of the gospel that in revelation 5

Jesus is the Lamb who was slain for you to purchase you with his death with his blood and his blood shed for us on the cross is what brings us salvation and healing and forgiveness and restoration and it is what makes us clean from the stain of sin and if you have trusted in him if you have trusted in the blood of the Lamb to wash you and make you clean then just like the great multitude in the day of the Lamb's wrath you can stand you can stand you can stand clothed in a white robe washed in the blood of the Lamb because you are safe and secure in his love and what's said in verses 15-17 if you look at chapter 7 verses 15-17 what is said about the great multitude is your sure hope and consolation as well and I'm as I read these verses as I read these verses

[26 : 37] I want to acknowledge that there are people all across this room who are experiencing a range of degrees of suffering that come from living in a fallen world and if that's you and you're here this morning I want you to receive these verses from Jesus himself as consolation for your soul 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 they shall hunger no more neither thirst anymore the sun shall not strike them nor any scorching heat for the lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd and he will guide them to springs of living water and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes can you imagine it does this seem too good to be true sheltered forever by the presence of God the lamb who was slain himself as your shepherd drinking from springs of living water all of your tears wiped away never having to suffer again this is the ultimate consolation and comfort and hope to all who trust in the lamb whose robes are washed white in his blood and to all who have suffered and died for the sake of

Christ the lamb who was slain is also our shepherd who brings us shelter and safety and security and consolation forever as a kid growing up in the 90s part of me longed to have that magic jersey I want to be transported to be a professional athlete play in the NFL play in the NBA I later found out I can't wear that magic jersey friends we don't have a magic jersey we have something better we have the word of God we have the book of revelation we have revelation chapter 7 this vision in revelation 7 transported john in the first century church to see the great multitude in ways that brought them encouragement and hope and assurance so that they could persevere in their generation faithful living and in gospel witness and it does the same for us today seeing this multi ethnic multitude encourages us to persevere in the global mission of the lamb despite opposition and difficulty it encourages us to go to places that are geographically hard to get to that are spiritually difficult and that are politically opposed to the spread of the gospel seeing this triumphant multitude assures us that the victory of the lamb over the powers of evil is never in doubt no matter what no matter the amount of suffering and persecution we face no matter even if we give our lives for the gospel and seeing this secure multitude reminds us of our ultimate consolation that in the day of the lamb's wrath we can stand because the lamb who was slain for us is our shepherd and so as we come to the end of revelation 7 we join our voices with the heavenly chorus and with the saints across the ages singing together with them salvation belongs to God and to the one to the lamb who sits on the throne blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever amen pray with me oh Lord God of heaven thank you so much for this vision that you gave the apostle John that

encouraged the first century church would you encourage us today would you assure us of these promises would you help us to persevere in the power of your spirit and knowing that the ultimate victory belongs to you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit Amen