

Revelation 7

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Date: 08 June 2008

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[0 : 00] Scripture reading, Revelation chapter 7. Please stand for the reading of God's word.

After this, I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree, then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun with the seal of the living God.

And he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, saying, Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.

And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000 sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel. 12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed.

12,000 from the tribe of Reuben. 12,000 from the tribe of Gad. 12,000 from the tribe of Asher.

12,000 from the tribe of Naphtali.

[1 : 15] 12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh. 12,000 from the tribe of Simeon. 12,000 from the tribe of Levi. 12,000 from the tribe of Issachar.

12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun, 12,000 from the tribe of Joseph, 12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed.

After this, I looked and behold, a great multitude that no one could number from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands and crying out with a loud voice, Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

And all the angels were standing around the throne, 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. Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, Who are these clothed in white robes, and from where have they come? I said to him, Sir, you know.

[2 : 40] And he said to me, These are the ones coming 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. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more.

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.

This is the word of the Lord. You know, as we have that scripture read today, it reminds me of the last time I preached on this very text.

It was the month of January, the year 2005. And we were doing a four-week series on our gospel work and race.

[4 : 05] And we had talked a lot in Holy Trinity Church about the gospel growing. And we asked a question that day, Where is the gospel going? And we saw that it was going to the presence of the throne room of God, where the Lamb was in the middle, where all the nations were there.

And we saw that it had quite a bit to say about race. That series in 2005, I opened that year saying that I felt, as a congregation, it was the most critical year in our history.

And that we needed to begin undertaking the work of establishing within our own midst a fuller understanding of where the gospel is going. There was a guest pastor who came and shared in that series with us.

His name was Arthur Jackson. And he came and preached in our midst in January of 2005 about the barriers in the road along the way to a multi-ethnic gospel work, but indeed we were called to it. And so as I stand here today and share ministry with Arthur in our midst, and to know that under your continued support of this congregation, we have hired Oscar Leyva, who begins a work on the west side.

[5 : 20] I am thrilled, thrilled to see that we are going where the gospel is going. Every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

And so as I come to this text today, it has some historical resonance with the direction of our work. I'm going to pray and then we'll get underway. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for this text. May it breathe in a living way from my lips this hour.

In Christ's name, amen. May not bother you, but it bothers me.

This big stanchion here is a large enough separation between us. We don't need anything else. We're famous, aren't we, for our ability to ask questions.

[6 : 25] We pride ourselves in deliberating the great questions of the day, particularly within our own community, under the shadow of one of the world's great universities.

The pursuit of questions is, well, it's embedded in regard to the reason for life. I've been reading this summer August Wilson's Century Cycle.

He is perhaps the most luminous of our African-American playwrights. Recently passed away in his early 80s, I believe, in about the year 2003.

He accomplished in the century cycle what I think could only be said to be one of the supreme literary achievements of the 20th century, a play representing each decade of the 19th or the 20th century in the confines of his own neighborhood setting outside of Pittsburgh.

And you trace the African-American movement in that part of our country over a century. One of the characters in his plays that continues to find voice is Aunt Esther.

[7 : 52] Aunt Esther is, according to Wilson, the embodiment of African-American wisdom, tradition, and folklore.

When asked in The Gem of the Ocean how old she is, she says she's 285. And she represents all of that history.

Wilson, in his writing of her, or I should say Zora Neale Hurston called her ability the boiled-down juice of human living.

She represents, then, in the play, the one who knows history, who can answer questions. They're always coming to her for answers because she knows what are the right questions and what are the wrong questions.

And, in fact, in Gem of the Ocean, which, if you haven't read, you should. She says, you've got to find out why it's important for Garrett Brown to die rather than to take his 30 days.

[9 : 00] Do you know why he didn't come out of the water, Mr. Citizen? Do you know why he chose to die rather than be branded a thief? Citizen, because he didn't do it.

Aunt Esther. We know he didn't do it. But why, Mr. Citizen? That's what we're trying to find out. Why he would rather die than say he was a thief.

She goes on and depicts, time and time again, our ability to ask questions but to never get a handle on the right ones. And you might be wondering, what in the world does this have to do with chapter 7 of Revelation?

It comes on the heels of a question. It's a question that I think you ought to see at the very end of chapter 6. It's the question, and who can stand?

I think John, the writer, has a bit of honest in him. When it comes time in the great visions of life to understand what is unfolding in the world, he asks the right question.

[10 : 15] Who is worthy? Who can stand? Of course, you and I don't come with those questions when we read chapter 6 with those four great apocalyptic horsemen wreaking havoc through all of the created order.

We saw last week in verse 1 where the seven seals were beginning to be opened in chapter 6 and a white rider came conquering, wreaking havoc on the world.

We saw the second seal open and the second living creature say, Come, and another horse, a red horse, taking peace from all the earth, slaying nation upon nation, a great sword given to him.

We saw the third seal opened and the creature saying, Come, and behold, a black horse. And we saw the economic woe that wreaked its way across society from age to age, scales in his hand, a

voice saying, A quart of wheat for a denarius and three quarts of barley for a denarius. We saw the fourth seal opened and we saw the great living creatures say, Come, and we saw the rider's name was Death and Hades followed him and authority given over him where a fourth of the earth is being killed by the sword and with famine and pestilence and wild beasts of the earth. [11:40] We saw that fifth seal where the great witnesses of God waited patiently. And then that cataclysmic sixth seal, great earthquakes emerging, the sun becoming black as sackcloth, the moon like full blood, the stars of the sky falling.

And indeed, men and women hiding themselves in verse 15 in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains. And indeed, it got this bad. 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 in the great day of the wrath has come and who can stand? Of course, in our enlightened day, we read a chapter like that and say, Why so much judgment?

Why? Why this chaotic rule, this holy God that wreaks unmitigated wrath upon the world? Indeed, the scriptures are clear that the wrath of God is already unfolding.

We read Deuteronomy 32 with that story of the building of the calf, the golden calf and the re-arrival of Moses in their midst. We see there in that very chapter where he anoints Aaron to go through the people of God with swords, killing man, woman, and child.

[13:02] And we read the whole chapter and we say, My goodness, this brutal, chaotic system in which God demands life for life and 3,000 die on a single day and the blood rises in the midst of the camp.

And we ask, If there is a God, would he indeed come with wrath and judgment? Of course, our questions are never Aunt Esther's questions or John's.

Aunt Esther would tell us, Why are you so little concerned with the glory of God? Why no questions on the making of the golden calf? Why no questions on the complete rebellion of God's created order?

Indeed, when we come to the end of chapter 6, the right question is before us, who can stand, who among us can hold off the great day of wrath as it is unleashed upon us.

When you come to chapter 7, then you might rightly expect that this question is answered. Indeed, I believe it is. You could say that Revelation 7 is the answer to the question put forward in chapter 6.

[14:19] I want you to see a couple of observations about the text generally. First, I want you to see that there are two visions. Because in answer to the question who can stand, he will answer twice, there will be some standing.

This indeed is the great comfort of chapter 6 that chapter 7 does arrive. But take a look at this little phrase how it opens. after this, 7-1.

Turn the page over and you'll see the same phrase again at the beginning of verse 9. After this. So in answer to the question who can stand, he sees another vision.

Indeed, two visions. After this is John's way of not just saying sequentially what comes next or chronologically what is connected next.

After this is his way of introducing a new vision. Take a look and you'll see it in chapter 4 verse 1.

[15:22] After this I looked and a new vision emerged. Take a look at chapter 5 verse 18. Excuse me.

I have it wrong there. Try chapter 15 verse 18. And you won't find it there either. Try chapter 18 and verse 1.

The things preachers do to get your nose back in the Bible. Chapter 18 verse 1 after this. Chapter 19 verse 1 after this.

This unique little phrase after this is John's way of indicating a new vision is going to be set before you. Something that he saw.

And so when you come back to Revelation chapter 7 on the heels of the question who can stand you are given in chapter 7 two visions.

[16:23] He's not sequentially unfolding what takes place after the events of chapter 6 or chronologically unfolding. He uses this phrase to say I have a new vision in answer to the question.

He completes the vision in chapter 8 or chapter 7 verse 8 he goes on and you realize that the second vision amplifies the first.

What are these pictures then? The first is one of a family reunion. We'll look at it in detail in a moment. But chapter 7 verses 1 through 8 is a family reunion.

It is of God's family. You see the anointed heads of the tribes of Judah. In chapter 7 verses 9 and following the vision is not going to be of a family reunion but it's going to be a vision that's filled with royal fanfare.

You're going to see the entrance into a throne room and into the presence of the living God and all the fanfare that is there and the two visions i.e.

[17 : 35] the two pictures speak of one and the same reality and they are answering the question who can stand who can secure themselves in the midst of God's impending judgment.

So let's take a look at the first vision. Let's look at it more closely to see what the implications are for us for Holy Trinity and for our work.

Where is the gospel going? Who will be able to stand? Verse 3 says that there will be those who have been sealed as the servants of God.

That is one of the greatest words in the text coming on the heels of chapter 6 as it does. God's wrath is presently being poured out against the world until Christ's return.

And on that day there will be no second opportunity for any to fall under his lordship. Yet although we have all rebelled and we have all sinned and we have all fallen short of the glory of God his family will be sealed kept protected.

[18 : 56] it says it again in verse 4 and I heard the number of the sealed 144 thousand were sealed.

And then again in verse 5 from the tribe of Judah many were sealed. And then look at the great inclusio all the way down at the end of verse 8 from Benjamin they were sealed.

John wants you to know that there will be those who stand who make it through the wrath of God and they are those who are sealed.

The entire family of God. Now I want to make two observations from this first vision about those who are sealed. First I want you to say something about the number the particularity of the number and then I want to say something about the specificity of the tribe.

Look at the number verse 4 144,000 that of course is the sum of the 12 times 12,000 given in verses 5 through 8 the number is 144,000 the tribes are given their patriarchal name and the question immediately comes to mind who are these 144,000 individuals in the book of Revelation now if you've never read the Bible before you're fortunate on this respect there have been so many interpretations on the 144,000 that you don't have to concern yourself with all of them today there are those who read this 144,000 things about it

[21 : 12] I think the 144,000 are the complete family of God both Jews and Gentiles from the ascension of Christ all the way until his return in other words that the number is a symbolic number of completeness and fullness that extends beyond the Jewish nation to all those who follow the Lamb now why would I think that well first of all turn over to Revelation 14 and verse 1 here again we see the number 144,000 then I looked and behold on Mount Zion stood the Lamb and with him 144,000 who had his name and his father's name written on their foreheads this writing upon the foreheads is not in my estimation some literal written word or number that you will see but rather he owns them he is theirs they have his name they bear his name and who are they later on in verse 3 no one could learn the song except the 144,000 and who are they they are those who had been redeemed from the earth verse 4 it is these who have not defiled themselves with women for they are virgins it is these who follow the lamb wherever he goes these have been redeemed from mankind as first fruits for

God and the lamb and in their mouth no lie was found for they are blameless the 144,000 in revelation 14 are described as those who had been redeemed from the earth redeemed from all of mankind as first fruits so when you come back to chapter 7 and you begin to look at the number 144,000 in answer to the question who makes it through the wrath of God the answer is the complete full family all those who have been redeemed from the face of the earth let me say a couple of other things about this let me put it another way when you're reading apocalyptic literature you have to determine how you take all the numbers we saw earlier we had a letter to seven letters to seven churches we've seen seven seals we're shortly going to see seven trumpets there will be other things of that nature in our own text you have the number twelve twelve times twelve now what

I want you to understand from the way that we're reading the scriptures here is that the numbers say something but what they say is not about the number that's the way apocalyptic literature works so twelve times twelve is one hundred and forty four and one hundred and forty four thousand is

about completeness or fullness and that is what I believe this vision is showing who is going to stand the complete number will stand the full number will stand all of them will stand everyone who's been redeemed from mankind will stand there will not be one lost everyone who the father calls to himself through his son shall be saved now let me say something not just about the number but I want to say something about the tribes we talked about in a sense the particularity of the number

I want to say something about the specificity of these tribes and again it's interesting I don't believe that these are just all representing Jewish tribes in the sense that we traditionally think of them let me say a couple of things about them this list doesn't correspond to any list we're given in the Old Testament secondly the tribe of Dan is omitted altogether and in his place we find Manasseh who was Joseph's son and when you begin to read the Hebrew scriptures concerning the tribe of Dan they were notorious for leading the northern kingdom away from God not only that but the tribes look at the order the tribes of Naphtali and Gad and Asher are elevated in the sequence these were the sons of the concubines from

Billah and Zilpah in other words these are the sons of the wives of Jacob who in some sense are not part of the covenant community so there's this elevation of those who are going to stand in the day of judgment who are not even born under the promise of the covenant that in this very way they represent for me the outsider the Gentile and so even within the makeup of the list of tribes we see that it's God's complete and full family from all the earth let me say this that when we get to heaven God's full family will be there in regard to the tribes there will still be specificity or diversity that's what I think is the significance of the way it's framed here you don't lose your tribal distinctiveness even on that great day the complete full diverse

[27 : 25] Jewish Gentile family will stand the vision closes the vision ends but John then is given another vision to amplify the first and I believe this is a separate vision verses 9 and following and it's not depicted in the terms of a family being at reunion but it's filled with the language of royal fanfare who can stand verse 9 couldn't be any clearer a great multitude is going to stand there they are in verse 11 even with the angels standing around the throne who can stand a multitude that no one could number and therein we begin to see how these visions sit in contraposition to one another the first vision who can stand the full complete number the second vision and that number no one could count after this

I looked and behold a great multitude that no one could number indicating then that those who will get through the world and into heaven is going to be a vast number a great number from the four corners of the earth rather than from a particular tribe notice the multitude is from every people every language all standing before the throne this is what John I think is telling us about where the gospel is going it is going somewhere that is akin to a family reunion with a complete number and a diversity to all its people it is going somewhere where they are almost without number from every tribe all tribes peoples!

all standing before the throne and before the Lamb and in this way then these visions these pictures depict the same thing this is where God is leading the history of the world what does it mean for us Holy Trinity needs to get on in the present with where the gospel is going in the future when we began this little church plant some ten years ago it was a very homogenous looking crew and we are learning even here from our text on what our family should eventually look like when we're all grown up it should be full and complete it should be from every corner and every people there should be a multitude of languages and tongues just recently

I was with a group of 50 pastors listening to one who ministers in Vancouver the most unchurched city in North America and he has a church of about 4,000 people and he said that as he's preaching he is simultaneously being translated into seven different languages kind of what we do here we're just experimenting with one Mandarin imagine seven languages one congregation hearing the gospel at the same time what a beautiful thing be fun to visit his church yet you and I can't walk four blocks in our own neighborhood without running across three or four different languages the power of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ needs to transcend the context in which we live we need from this corner of the city a rising multitude of people who come under the banner of the Lamb and begin to give praise and glory to God the Father and the Son not only for creation but salvation we need to learn and live with one another this is where the gospel is going it's interesting when you begin to see what it is they will be doing I mean take a look what they're going to be doing is giving praise and honor and glory to God from all for all time verse 10 they were crying out with a

loud voice salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the lamb and all the angels were around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures and they fell on their faces saying amen blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever!

[33 : 05] and ever! Amen! Worship is where the gospel is going but mission exists as one writer has said mission exists because worship doesn't it is the mission of this congregation to fully reflect and be enriched by the ethnic diversity of our part in the city I know that this is maybe a bit exhortative rather than expositional at this point but I just want to say that I have become convinced that Chicago itself and the south side in particular is becoming the epicenter for national discussion on the issues that are most angst filled in our country it is no surprise to me that Reverend Jeremiah Wright and all the feelings that are underneath the racial discussions in our country arise from the city south side it is no surprise to me that

Reverend Flager finds his residence on the city's south side our city's south side it is no surprise to me that from the very lectern where I stand I can look through the back doors and see nearly if I look to the left a little the home of our Democratic Party's nominee for the president of the United States of this country indeed Chicago but in particular the south side and with specificity this corner will continually be the epicenter for discussion on the troubles and problems that have wracked our country for well over a hundred or so years this city was built intentionally on the lines of segregation from the names of streets and where they stop to the one ways and where they end to the to the bridges that one cannot go under and enter this city is built like Babel the Lord God frustrating the plans of the world to be united and therefore from this city from this congregation the world well whether the world ever sees you or not is irrelevant to me the heavens need to see a congregation that lifts up the name of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God we need to see a commitment to one another from every tribe and people and language and nation learning to live with one another for indeed this is your future where the gospel is going this is your privilege as a congregation this is your hour to which you have been asked to live and work and serve why would we not take up now with the task on earth if this is going to reflect our calling in heaven and if this is the reality of heaven why would this not be that which we put our back to while here on earth holy trinity church we have a passion to be a gospel growing church but gospel growth must be biblically connected to where the gospel is going and it is going to culminate in the family of god a vast family without number enriched by and rich in diversity and complete in its universality so that god will not be left left without a witness in the world could this be where the great forces of industrialization and urbanization have been moving under the hand of god could god not be the one bringing all the nations to the great cities of the world could god not actually be orchestrating within the very context of the streets on which you live the need for his gospel to be reflected in local family even now the scriptures speak that this is so that god might create within us the very city of god we live at a unique moment at a unique time there is not another city in this country that i believe the work will be more exalted but more difficult to obtain this city chicago with its hundred years of intention partiality its intention segregation its cultivated isolation is all i believe under the hand of god be overrun with small local fellowships that reflect the glory of heaven even now this is god's most difficult work it's the work he's given himself to do many neighborhoods in chicago are so homogeneously inclined that the work would be unmanageable or undoable within them for hyde park it is not so as a hyde park person as a chicagoan in part and in large measure i am here because i love the diversity i love the vibrant stimulation of the nations on the street together show me one person in hyde park who does not feel that same way 53rd street is our street because

it's where the world collides and we love it so with all of this uniqueness i say to you is not this indeed part of our calling should we not be attempting to approximate this truth this chapter relieving the wrath of god by bringing people under the banner of the lamb i asked arthur jackson many years ago if being a pastor of a multi ethnic church was for everyone and he said no it has to be a personal calling well it is for him for me for everyone on staff why because this is where the gospel is going so you and i must give ourselves to the gospel growing if not the wrath of god continues to roll against the men and women whom you and i love two things i'll highlight at the end two words verse 15 he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence what a comforting word shelter to be sealed and then sheltered who here doesn't need this sheltering verse 17 for the lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd as we give ourselves to the work of god may

he be our shelter and may the lord jesus christ be our shepherd in his name amen our heavenly father in regard to the eloquence of sermonic talk this has been a failure in regard to the raw exposure to where the gospel is going your word is clear give ourselves to your son that we might give ourselves to one another in his name amen