

The original title for this sermon in the series of John and the Revelation that Pastor Mike put together was “overwhelmed.” The idea was that in this passage that I am about to read we are overwhelmed by the glory of the Lamb on the throne. There is great praise in this passage. However, I have the feeling that for some people, the word “overwhelmed” refers to how they feel about the book of Revelation. What do you do with this book? All the symbolism and possible interpretations? There are several approaches to the book of Revelation. There are historical approaches, some that say this is just about the history of the seven churches during the time of the Apostle John and others that say this is the history of the church from after Jesus to the return of Jesus. And then there are the futurist approaches which say this is only about the future return of Christ and the end times of the church. In reality, Revelation is a combination of these. Some parts clearly refer to the churches of John’s time historically and other parts are clearly the future, such as the resurrection of the saints and the second coming. And because the book of Revelation has this dual nature, some people just shy away from it.



But we can’t shy away from this book because this is scripture. Whether you approach this historically or futuristically, it still reveals to us God’s ways and how we need to live in light of that. So we are going to look at this great passage of praise in Revelation chapter 7 and we are going to consider what the truths for the churches of John’s time mean for our church today.

Revelation 7:9-17

9 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.

10 And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”

11 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!”

13 Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?”

14 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.

15 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.

16 ‘Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,’ nor any scorching heat.

17 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.’ ”

So in the first six chapters of Revelation we have tribulation. I am not going to get into the topic of “THE” tribulation, when it was or is, and on which side of it we enter eternity. That is not necessary here. The point is that the early churches were facing persecution and suffering. And one of the points of the book of Revelation is that John is making clear that there will be tribulation, but also in the end God wins. And here in chapter 7 the hope and the promise of what God will do starts to be fulfilled. So we start at verse 9 with a huge worship service. Look at what it says; “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: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.” All the angels were standing around the throne ...saying: “Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!” Wow! Can you imagine what this worship was like? You know how much Larry can lift the roof off this place with his organ playing, well add to that multitudes of people and angels. Imagine the noise, the sound, the feeling of joy. The excitement of the praise. Picture the waving Palm branches, not doubt reminding us of Palm Sunday, only now Jesus is King in his new kingdom. This is what worship is supposed to be. We are to give God glory. And notice that the point is not to make the multitude or the angels feel good, although that is a byproduct of the event. But the point is to worship God. God is the focus, God is the center of what is going on, and God has the attention of everyone in this worship scene. Verse 9, the great multitude is before the throne of God. Verse 10 the angels are standing around the throne. Everyone is facing the throne. The Lamb of God is the center of the scene.

This is important for us to remember in our worship. God should always be the focus of our worship. Yes, it is nice to have good music, a beautiful sanctuary, flowers, fellowship time, etc. But those things should never be the focus of our worship time. Even when using music the focus should be aimed towards glorifying God, not our own voices and talents. Even on a weekend like the Kirkin o’ the tartan, when there is a lot of pomp and celebration, the point should still be what God did through the early reformers to further the glory of God through the Christian church. God should always be the focus of our worship. And particularly the Lamb of God, the one who has made the sacrifice for our sin, should be the center of every worship scene.

So we have this great worship service and notice who is there. Verse 9 tells us that the multitude is “from every nation, tribe, people and language.” When asking folks what they think heaven will be like, I have had people tell me that we will have new forms and will all be one together in heaven. Well that is not exactly what this passage says. According to this, we will still have our identity. We will recognize people being from different nations, different races, and speaking different languages. We retain our identity and uniqueness. The unique goodness of God’s creation is fulfilled, not erased. And this says that people from ALL nations are there. No group of people is excluded.

When I look out at this congregation, I see a variety of people from a variety of nations. This congregation includes Americans, Sudanese, Pakistani, Indian, British, South African, Korean, and many more.

There is a beautiful diversity in this church. But we should not get too comfortable on this. Remember that the reason for studying Revelation is to see what truths are taught about the church and how we should apply them to our churches today. The first point I made was that the focus of all our worship should be God. The point of this part of the passage is that no nation, no group or language should be excluded because they all come to the celebration at the end. Even though we have diversity in our church, we need to always be on the look for the group excluded or under-represented and try to do better, because God wants them to be part of the universal church.

I think the most obvious group missing here is the college aged population. The University of Utah has an estimated enrollment of 31 thousand students. 31 thousand right up the hill from here. Have we found a way to make them part of this worshipping body of Christ? Are we sharing the risen Jesus with them? We aren't. We need to do better. We...all of us, not just myself and Pastor Mike. We as a congregation have a group, almost the size of a nation, in our midst and they are missing from this worship scene. John makes it clear that all will be there at the throne of God and this is part of the work of the church. So this is a truth that we need to work on. I do want to make you aware that we are supporting two new missionaries in this area. And they are both right at the U.



Hannah Dessel is the new staff member for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship at the University of Utah. Student led “witnessing communities” seek to connect students in the Arts (music, drama, dance, studio art) with Christ. InterVarsity groups are weekly, student-led Bible studies aimed at gathering communities of students to form deeper friendships and practically discover what it means to follow Jesus in college. Hannah and husband Derek assist with 1st Pres Youth on Sunday mornings.



Eddie Williams is the new staff person for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes at the University of Utah. Campus ministry is led by student-athletes and coaches with Huddles, Team Bible Studies, Coaches Bible Studies, and outreach events. Eddie was drafted by the Washington Redskins in 2009. He was starting fullback for the Cleveland Browns and Seattle Seahawks. He played college football at University of Idaho.

This is one way we can support the gospel message being shared at the U. But we need to do more. We should not stop there. I encourage you as a congregation to think of ways we can be the church to the 31 thousand students up the hill.

So, we have this great worship scene and we know who is there. But then we have this funny moment in the passage where an elder asks about the people in white robes and John clarifies, even though the elder

should know the answer. Starting in verse 13: “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.” John tells him that these are those who have suffered for their faith. And as we look at this seventh chapter of Revelation, we need to do it in context. And we have to ask what comes right before this in chapter 6? In chapter 6 those martyred for the sake of the church are given white robes and told to wait a little longer. Then in this chapter 7 the martyrs are finally brought into God’s presence for eternity. These people in white robes washed clean by the blood of Jesus Christ, they are martyrs.

Now martyrdom is a tough topic. It is one we have a strange two-sided relationship with here in the United States. It is something we see in the news, the very real martyrdom of Christians in Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, and other places. We are aware of it because we live in an age where information travels almost instantly across the world. We are very aware of modern day Christian martyrs and the fact that they seem to be increasing in number. If today were before the age of the telegram, we may never know that this is going on. But because we live in the time that we do, we know it is going on through the media. But even though we know martyrdom is something happening every day in the world, it is something we do not feel the real pressure of in our daily lives here. We can worship freely in this place today. We will not likely be stormed by militants. We probably won’t find the ISIS symbol for Nazarene,



that’s the symbol that ISIS uses to mark Christians, we probably won’t find this spray painted on our homes or garages. So how are we to really understand Christian martyrs, as well as find our part in this era of the Christian church?

Well the word martyr comes from the First Century Greek word for witness. The word is *martys*. It means witness throughout the New Testament, witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But in Acts 22:20 Paul uses this word for the first time to refer to Stephen, who died because of his witness. John then uses this word in the same way in the book of Revelation here. So a martyr is someone who is a witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the case of Stephen and the later use of the word, it refers to someone that dies as a witness to the resurrected Jesus Christ. God promises that those that die in his name do not die in vain. They are gathered up into God’s presence for eternity.

So what is our role in all of this? What do we do as Americans aware of the persecution of Christians around the world, yet not under immediate threat ourselves. One thing I think we need to do morally is be a voice for those being killed. Be a witness. It is reported that in the town of Aleppo in Syria, where the orthodox Christian church has existed for centuries and where there used to be 400,000 Christians, there are now only 45,000 Christians. And this is as of 2015....it is now 2016. The Christian population in Syria has been diminished by 2/3 since 2011. Thousands of people martyred or thrown out of the country. Some scholars project that the Syriac Christian church, one of the oldest Christian groups in the world, will be wiped out in the

not so distant future. In an age where information moves so quickly, this should not go by us unnoticed. Do we not own it to them, as victims of terrorism ourselves on 9/11, do we not own it to them to be a voice for them?

This week I wrote a letter to the editor of the Salt Lake Tribune. I questioned why the bombing in Lahore, Pakistan, which targeted Christians and killed 72 people, at least 24 of which were children, I asked why this had fallen out of their press since the day after the bombing while the Brussels bombings, which are also tragic yet had a much smaller death toll, remained in the press this week. I pleaded with the Tribune to keep the presses rolling and keep us aware and informed of what is happening because education is the first step towards action. I got no response. Some of the press are starting to question why the West seems to have ignored the persecution of Christians in the Middle East. On March 17, just a month ago, John Kerry declared that that ISIS is committing genocide against Christians in the Middle East. Yet nothing seems to have changed. We have a responsibility to be a voice. We are in the process of putting together a prayer service here for the Pakistani community to pray for those being persecuted. I will let you know when we get that scheduled, but in the meantime, be a witness, be their voice.

Another thing we can do as Christians is do what the word martyr really means; witness. Be a witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Be a witness for Christ with your mouth and with your actions and with your whole lifestyle. The great commission by Jesus Christ in Matthew 28 says go and make disciples of all the nations. And in this 7th chapter of Revelation by John we find that all the nations are present. So the work of the church has to be done between now and then. We need to do what we were formed to do. And then God is faithful in the end.

God's faithfulness is the last point of this passage. In verses 15 and on it says this: "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.' "

In the end, despite the suffering of this life, afterwards God alleviates all that suffering and protects those who are his. His sheep are in his presence for eternity. This is the promise. And this promise has been there from the beginning with the nation of Israel. John is actually quoting Isaiah chapter 49 here. The restoration promised in the Old Testament, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, is now coming to fruition in the book of Revelation. God is faithful beginning to end. We are not always faithful, but God is faithful to those that follow him. He knows his sheep and they know his voice and they follow him, as we read in John chapter 10 earlier.

So at the beginning of this passage we had that great worship scene, where we were reminded that God must be the focus of our worship and that every group, every nation will be represented there. Then in the middle of this passage we were reminded of the reality of Christian persecution and martyrdom. And that we are called to be witnesses to both the truth of what is happening to our Christian brothers and sisters, as well as witnesses with our lives to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Then at the end of this passage we are reminded of God's promise to be faithful. To complete what he began in the Old Testament. To restore us to him, to protect us, care for us, and keep us in his presence for eternity. Let's take these truths taught by John to the early seven churches and make them true for us today as well, until Jesus kingdom is fully realized. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.