

The Safety of the Lamb

Revelation 7:9-17

Introduction

We now come to the passage in the Bible that some of you have heard so much about. For some of you, you are already familiar with the story of how God miraculously healed me, so I will not spend much time retelling it. However, there is something I have not talked much about, and it has to do with my response to this passage in Revelation 7:9-17.

When I was serving as the senior pastor at Northwest Baptist Church, the pressure of ministry began to affect me in ways I did not expect. The church was in a difficult season, and I was carrying a lot. Anxiety began to take a toll on my health. Because of my family history, my doctor sent me to a cardiologist, who ordered a CT scan in 2007. The results were sobering. The scan showed seven areas of calcified plaque in my left coronary artery, and my calcium score was higher than ninety percent of men my age. I was only thirty-two years old, and because my dad died when he was forty-seven, you can imagine where my mind went. Suddenly, I was scheduled for a cardiac catheterization, wondering whether I was going to die young like my father.

That Friday morning, before a Converge Rocky Mountain regional gathering, I prayed a simple prayer: “Lord, would You encourage me from Your Word?” Then I opened my Bible, and it opened to Revelation 7:9–12. I read about the great multitude no one could number, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and the Lamb, crying out, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” Honestly, nothing happened. I read it, closed my Bible, and went on with my day. I believed Revelation was the Word of God, but I had mostly learned to read it as a book about future events, so I did not yet grasp the pastoral comfort God had placed in this vision.

The next morning, as we sang “How Great Is Our God,” the imagery of Revelation 7 rushed back to me. It was as though the Lord gently pressed a question into my heart: “Keith, do you understand what awaits you if you die?” That was the question I had missed. I had read Revelation 7 as a future scene, but I had not yet learned to receive it as comfort for the present. In that moment, the fear began to lift—not because I knew what would happen during the catheterization, but because the Lord reminded me of where I was going if I belonged to the Lamb. If I lived, I belonged to Christ. If I died, I would be with Christ. Either way, my future was secure.

The following week, during the cardiac catheterization, the cardiologist paused and said, “Keith, there’s nothing there.” The plaque that had appeared on the CT scan was gone. I cannot explain it medically, but I believe God, in His mercy, protected me. Yet the gift God gave me in that season was not only more years. He also began to open my eyes to this book’s purpose. Revelation is not merely a book for charting future events. It is given to strengthen the church by showing us Jesus Christ. It is for suffering, anxious, grieving, persecuted, and weary saints who need to be reminded that the Lamb is on the throne.

Revelation 7:9–17 shows us where every person who belongs to the Lamb is headed. The people of the Lamb will stand before the throne. They will be clothed in white. They will worship. They will be sheltered by God. They will hunger no more. They will thirst no more. The Lamb will be their Shepherd. God Himself will wipe away every tear from their eyes. What I did not understand then is that this passage not only gives us a glimpse of heaven; it also comforts every Christian from every generation. This passage is for me, and it is for you.

God is the Keeper of Salvation (vv. 9-12)

As we saw last week, John hears the number of God’s sealed people described as 144,000 from the tribes of Israel (Rev. 7:4–8), but when he looks, he sees a great multitude no one can number from every nation, tribe, people, and language (v. 9). These are not two separate peoples of God; they are Jews and Gentiles gathered into one redeemed people through Israel’s Messiah. The promise God gave to Abraham—that “all the families of the earth” would be blessed through him (Gen. 12:3)—has come to full bloom through Christ, the Lamb who purchased people for God “**from every tribe and language and people and nation**” (Rev. 5:9–10). Now, in Revelation 7, that redeemed people stands before the throne and the Lamb, where no one in Revelation 6 could stand (Rev. 6:17; 7:9).

After God mercifully spared me and the doctors found my left coronary artery clear, one of the first people I told was Ed Hardesty. He said, “**Remember, son, just as quickly as God removed that plaque from your arteries, He can put it right back again.**” That was a word I needed to hear. God had not healed me so that I could go on living as though my life belonged to me. He had healed me for a purpose, and that purpose is centered around His mission.

But there was another lesson for me right there in Revelation 7. Why does John first hear the people of God described as 144,000 sons of Israel before he sees them as a multitude from the nations? The list has the feel of a census, and more specifically, a military census. In Numbers 1, Israel was counted by tribe according to the number of men able to go to war (Num. 1:2–3), and that census begins with Reuben, Jacob’s firstborn. But Revelation 7 begins with Judah, because from Judah came the Lion who is also the Lamb (Rev. 5:5). In other words, Revelation is not merely giving us a headcount of redeemed Jewish men; it is giving us a Christ-centered picture of the people of God gathered and ordered around the conquering Lamb.

Scripture also connects wartime readiness with consecration. When David and his men needed bread, Ahimelech asked whether the young men had kept themselves from women, and David answered that they had, because they were on a holy mission (1 Sam. 21:4–5). Later, when David tried to cover up his sin with Bathsheba, Uriah refused to go home to his wife while Israel’s army was in the field. He said, **“The ark and Israel and Judah dwell in booths... Shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife?”** (2 Sam. 11:11). Uriah understood something David had forgotten: a soldier at war does not live as though the war does not exist.

That background also helps us when we come to Revelation 14, where the 144,000 are described in the ESV and NIV as those “who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins” (Rev. 14:4). That wording can be misleading if we assume John is referring only to literal unmarried men. The Greek word translated “virgins” is *parthenoi*, from *parthenos*, which can refer to virginity but can also carry the idea of chastity or purity. This is why the NASB2020 translates Revelation 14:4, **“These are the ones who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are celibate.”**

The point is not that only unmarried men belong to the Lamb, or that these men are a specific group of virgin men who will be saved in the future. The point is symbolic. Revelation portrays the 144,000 as a consecrated people whose allegiance to the Lamb is marked by purity, devotion, and wartime faithfulness. They have not given themselves over to spiritual adultery with Babylon; they belong wholly to the Lamb.

This is what I missed for so many years. The census of the 144,000 sons of Israel represents the great multitude redeemed from the nations, and their devotion to the Lamb includes a wartime ethic. Paul says, **“Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil,”** because **“we do not wrestle against flesh and blood”** (Eph. 6:11–12). This ethic runs throughout Revelation. Jesus told the church in Smyrna, **“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life”** (2:10). The martyrs under the altar had been slain **“for the word of God and for the witness they had borne”** (6:9). Revelation 12 says the people of God conquered the dragon **“by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony,”** because **“they loved not their lives even unto death”** (12:11). Revelation 14 describes the 144,000 as those who **“follow the Lamb wherever he goes”** (14:4). Revelation 18 calls God’s people to **“come out of her... lest you take part in her sins”** (18:4).

How is the Christian able to remain faithful with a wartime ethic? They are able to resist because they have the seal of God upon them. It is the One on the throne who is keeping those who belong to Him (John 10:27-30), and it is He who promises to complete the work He is doing in and through them, for Paul wrote of this very thing: **“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ”** (Phil. 1:6). Listen, salvation in the Bible is not only the forgiveness of sins and pardon from the wrath of God; it also includes the promise that those sealed by the Spirit belong to God and will be kept until the

day of redemption (Eph. 1:13-14; 1 Pet. 1:5). This is why the redeemed multitude of both Jews and Gentiles from the nations cry out with a loud voice, **“Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”** (Rev. 7:10). And this is why all the angels around the throne and the four living creatures fall on their faces in worship of God, saying, **“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen”** (v. 12).

Salvation is for the Christian to Experience (vv. 13-17)

Now, the other thing I did not recognize in 2007 but discovered while tracing the parallels in Revelation has been right in front of me all these years—and I missed it. For years, I assumed the great multitude in Revelation 7 described only the martyred saints from the fifth seal, those who were slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne (Rev. 6:9). But one of the elders asked John, **“Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?”** (v. 13). That question is our first clue to the identity of this great multitude.

When was the last time in Revelation that one of the elders spoke directly to John? It was two chapters earlier, when John wept because no one was found worthy to open the scroll. Then one of the elders said to him, **“Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered”** (5:5). But when John looked, he did not see a conquering lion in the way we might expect; he saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain. Then the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders sang a new song explaining how the Lamb conquered: **“Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth”** (5:9–10).

That matters because the elder in Revelation 7 is helping John see the result of the Lamb’s victory. The great multitude standing before the throne is not limited to the martyrs from the fifth seal, though they are certainly included. This multitude is the people Jesus ransomed by His blood—the redeemed from every tribe, language, people, and nation across every generation, kept by God until the Day of the Lord.

John knows that the elder already knows the answer, so he says, “Sir, you know.” Then the elder answers his own question: **“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”** (v. 14). The second clue to the identity of this multitude is what made their robes white: the blood of the Lamb.

Blood does not normally make things clean; it stains. But Revelation shows us what the blood of Jesus does for sinners. Isaiah said, **“though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow”** (Isa. 1:18). John writes, **“the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin”** (1 John 1:7). Revelation has already told us that Jesus **“loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood”** (1:5). So when Revelation 7 says their robes have been made white in the blood of the

Lamb, it speaks of salvation. They are clean before God because the Lamb was slain for them, and that salvation is received by faith in Him.

There is a third clue about who these redeemed people are, found in verse 15: they are “**before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple.**” This is priestly language. In the Old Testament, Israel was called to be “**a kingdom of priests and a holy nation**” (Ex. 19:6). Now, through the blood of the Lamb, that calling is fulfilled in the redeemed people of Jesus Christ. Revelation 5 has already told us that the Lamb ransomed people for God from every tribe, language, people, and nation, and made them “**a kingdom and priests to our God**” (Rev. 5:9–10). So the multitude in Revelation 7 is not a separate group from those introduced in Revelation 5. They are the priestly people of God, standing before His throne, serving Him in His temple, and wholly belonging to the Lamb.

One other thing needs to be pointed out here. Revelation 7 does not say these Christians are only those who were slain for their faith, as we saw in the fifth seal (Rev. 6:9), nor does it identify them specifically as those who were beheaded, as we will see later in Revelation 20:4. Instead, they are identified as those “**coming out of the great tribulation**” (v. 14). We will have more time later in Revelation to unpack the repeated time markers John uses—three and a half years, 1,260 days, and forty-two months—but for now, it is enough to say that Revelation presents the church as living in tribulation now, while also pointing to an intensified expression of that tribulation before the return of Christ.

So when the elder speaks of “**the great tribulation,**” I understand him to be describing the full reality of the church’s suffering in this age, including its intensified expression before Jesus comes again. The encouragement of Revelation 7 is not that the people of the Lamb avoid tribulation, but that they come out of it. They are brought safely through it, washed by the blood of the Lamb, and gathered before the throne of God.

Notice how the elder describes those who are brought safely through the tribulation: “**They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb**” (v. 14). He portrays their cleansing as a completed action. In other words, nothing you can ever do can add to or take away from the salvation Jesus purchased for you through the shedding of His blood.

Jesus could not have been clearer: “**Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him**” (John 3:36). You are saved by the blood of Christ and by Him alone. Belief results in salvation, but do not misunderstand: true belief in the Son also leads to obedience.

While it is true that we will still sin, the evidence that you believe and have been saved by the blood of the Lamb is that you run to Him out of hatred for your sin and love for the One who saved your soul. This is the point John makes in his epistle: “**But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses**

us from all sin... If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:7–9). This is why the multitude cries out with a loud voice, and why one day we will join them: **“Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”** (Rev. 7:10).

And what is this salvation that awaits all the redeemed of the Lord? It is salvation, full and complete—when sin and death are no more, when sighing and sorrow flee away, when what is mortal is swallowed up by life, and when God wipes away every tear from the eyes of those covered by the blood of the Lamb. On that day, we will experience the promise of Revelation 7:16–17: **“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.”**

What guarantee do you have that you will come out of the tribulation? What assurance do you have that when you stand before Jesus, you will not hear those terrible words, **“I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness”** (Matt. 7:23)? Revelation gives us the answer at the very center of the book: **“And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death”** (12:11). The assurance of the Christian is not that we were strong enough to hold on to Jesus, but that the blood of the Lamb was strong enough to cleanse us, the testimony of Jesus was strong enough to keep us, and the grace of God was strong enough to make us faithful even unto death.