

Psalm 23 The Great Multitude
Revelation 7:9-17
May 11, 2025

The Book of Revelation is fascinating and confounding at the same time. The last few weeks we have been taking a glimpse at the vision of a heavenly throne room where God reigns, as it is described in the fourth chapter. We have heard of the living creatures and the elders and the spirits that are the attendants at the heavenly court, worshipping and serving there and carrying out God's will.

The text for today comes from the seventh chapter. Bear with me while I give an update regarding the fifth and sixth chapters so there is at least a chance of keeping track of the narrative. In the fifth chapter the one sitting on the throne, presumably God, has a scroll with seven seals, and there is an angel asking after someone able to open the seals, and there is weeping because no one is found except a Lamb that looks as though it has been slain.

In the sixth chapter the Lamb begins to open the seals and after each of the first four there comes the infamous four horsemen of the apocalypse delivering the plagues. After the fifth seal there was an altar under which could be seen the souls of those who had been slain for the Word of God.

At this point the living creatures cry out, "how long?" They were given white robes and told to wait. Then the sixth seal was opened and there was an earthquake

while everyone hid as the sky was rolled back like a scroll and there was nowhere to hide. The sealed 144,000 from Israel were produced, which have been especially confounding. And that brings us to the very interesting scene in the seventh chapter, before the opening of the seventh seal.

In his vision at this point, John sees a great multitude no one can count. It came from every nation, tribe, people, and language, all standing there before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were all wearing white robes and holding palm branches, and crying out,

"Salvation belongs to our God."

The angels were there and the elders and the living creatures, and they worshipped. One of the elders asked John, "these in the white robes, who are they and where do they come from?" John answered, "you know," and the elder did know. He said that they are the ones who have come out of the great tribulation and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

It is, of course, a fantastic scene, and along with most of what is in the Book of Revelation has challenged the bible's readers for the last 1900 hundred years. The arguing back and forth has filled up the pages of commentaries and theology books. I confess that I do not have answers that would satisfy these questioners but would only add to the confusion.

But I am of the belief that sometimes it is best not to try to figure it all out, but accept these texts for what they contain. And this great multitude is intriguing. It represents those who have suffered much but have been brought into the presence of God and the Lamb.

They come from everywhere and there is no end to their number. And they are given white robes and later new names which are their true names, and great consolation;

“Never again will they hunger
never again will they thirst.
The sun will not beat upon them,
nor any scorching heat.”

And in a reminiscence of the 23rd Psalm, we read;

“that 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.”

The gist of the Book of Revelation is not so much to predict when the end of time will occur. Human speculation has always been wrong. On this point the answer to the question is, “wait.” Wait patiently; wait faithfully. The world is full of trouble, and though the trouble is attributed to the affect of billions of sinful people over time living flawed lives, making bad decisions and doing bad things, the answer of the

bible is that all will be well in the end, and we are to wait faithfully for its arrival.

The grand scene in the heavenly courtroom is meant to reassure us that the actions of people over time is not the only factor in play, human voices are not the only voices. As a matter of fact, they are not even the primary voices. Right under our noses God is deciding and acting, and it is nowhere more clear the will, and activity of God, than in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Lamb of God.

In all our striving, both to seek a better life individually, and a better world, we are assured of the presence of God, and not only of God’s presence but of God’s intimate concern for each of us in the middle of our doing. Even in the bad things, like the cross or any the world’s monstrosities and destructions, or our thoughts, we find God’s redemptive presence. The kingdom is in our midst and we are aware of God’s protective and sustaining care.

What does faithful living look like? We can begin with:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; Love your neighbor as yourself;

We can move on to the Fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

We can say after Paul in Philippians, “Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:
Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped; rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a human being,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!”

We can lift up the banners of compassion and kindness. We can admonish one another towards good deeds; we can say, “to live is Christ,” and, “be good citizens.” Live honorably and with integrity. Be gracious and full of thanksgiving.

There is more, of course, and I am sure you have heard it all before, but it has been repeated again in the hope that we will be reminded that we have not been abandoned while we wait.

As we hear this litany of goodness, and think about what can be added to it, and the kinds of things that should be left out, let us also imagine this great multitude that is a part of the vision of the Apocalypse, and be encouraged in the knowledge that by God’s grace *we are included in that multitude.*

The psalm for the day is the 23rd, and it makes sense to let it speak its message. We often recite it at memorial services, but it should also be a part of

Sunday worship from time-to-time, for it speaks of what faithful living under grace looks like, and of the life of the Lamb who is the Good Shepherd.

It is the valley of the shadow, but that is only one word; there are also still waters and green pastures and cups that overflow. There is discipline but the Lord disciplines those he loves. There is mercy. Let us recite the psalm together as the final word, in the context of these reflections, with the great multitude on our minds:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul:
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:

Thou anointest my head with oil;
my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Amen.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;
 he makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters;
 he restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
 for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow
 of death, I fear no evil;
 for you are with me;
Your rod and your staff,
 they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
 in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil,
 my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
 all the days of my life;
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
 for ever. Amen.

Romans 1

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven
against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who
by their wickedness suppress the truth. 19 For what
can be known about God is plain to them, because
God has shown it to them. 20 Ever since the creation
of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal
power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the
things that have been made. So they are without
excuse; 21 for although they knew God they did not
honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they

became futile in their thinking and their senseless
minds were darkened. 22 Claiming to be wise, they
became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the
immortal God for images resembling mortal man or
birds or animals or reptiles.
24 Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their
hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies
among themselves, 25 because they exchanged the
truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served
the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for
ever! Amen.

3:9 What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at
all; for I have already charged that all men, both Jews
and Greeks, are under the power of sin, 10 as it is
written:

“None is righteous, no, not one;

11 no one understands, no one seeks for God.

12 All have turned aside, together they have gone
wrong;

no one does good, not even one.”

13 “Their throat is an open grave,
they use their tongues to deceive.”

“The venom of asps is under their lips.”

14 “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”

15 “Their feet are swift to shed blood,

16 in their paths are ruin and misery,

17 and the way of peace they do not know.”

18 “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

19 Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks
to those who are under the law, so that every mouth
may be stopped, and the whole world may be held

accountable to God. 20 For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

Righteousness through Faith

21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; 23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; 26 it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus.

6:14 For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

6:20 Law came in, to increase the trespass; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, 21 so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Sin and Idolatry - trust in the human capacity to solve the human predicament, answer the question and solve the problem of human life. All sin is a form of self-idolatry.

Sin and Grace versus Sin and Imago Dei

The enigma of the human condition - Human beings are sinful, and under grace at the same time.

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