

REVELATION 7:9-17

SPOILER ALERT: THE END OF THE STORY

[As we read, try to imagine the scene – let your mind soar a little. Revelation was meant to be seen as well as heard].

Do you ever read the end of a book first? A husband once asked his wife why she always reads the end of novels first. “I want to know how the story ends, to see if it’s worth reading,” she explained. Knowing the end took away the fear and freed her to enjoy the story.¹

In all the epic stories we love, no matter how dark things get in the middle, in the end light defeats the darkness. What is the darkness right now? In your own life? In the world? As you follow Jesus in the way of the cross, are you weary with all that has taken place lately? I am.

Brothers and sisters, there is great danger here: **If we lose sight of the End of the Story, we lose heart in the present.**

When we lose sight of the End of the Story, two things happen:

- 1) **We try to find heaven on earth.** We get overwhelmed by the darkness and begin to forget God’s Story – that his kingdom is coming and that he is making all things new. When we try to find heaven on earth – we’ll make false heavens: a relationship, family, financial security, pleasure – we won’t find it. Instead “we will live as desperate, demanding, and eventually despairing men and women.”² As Paul said, “If in Christ we have hope in *this life only*, we are of all people most to be pitied” (I Corinthians 15:19, italics added).
- 2) **We lose courage.** In some way, we all suffer from a shriveled view of heaven. Perhaps we think of it as a long, boring church service with plump baby angels playing tiny harps. The danger of a shriveled view of heaven is that it leads to shriveled courage in the face of darkness and tribulation. If the end of the story is so boring, why risk anything?

¹ John Eldredge, *The Sacred Romance: Drawing Closer to the Heart of God*, p. 177.

² Eldredge, p. 179.

But “[God] has put eternity into [our hearts]” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). We have longings that no relationship or pleasure or adventure on earth can satisfy. We know there’s something far more captivating than what we see.

This morning – *spoiler alert* – we’ll consider the true End of the Story in Revelation 7. **The End of the Story** (and the book of Revelation, for that matter) **can be summarized in two words: “Christ wins.”** In story fashion, let’s consider the characters, the action, and the setting at the End of the Story that we might not lose heart.

I. The Characters: Who Will Be There?

A. (v. 9) “behold, a great multitude”

1. Who is this?

- “no one could number.” Could this be a fulfillment of God’s promise when he brought Abraham outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them...So shall your offspring be” (Genesis 15:5).

2. Where is this numberless multitude from?

- “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages”

Another promise to Abraham – “I have made you the father of a multitude of nations” (Gen. 17:5).

[closest I’ve gotten to this was an annual worship service at Briarwood – all international congregations in one service – Japanese, Korean, Hispanic, and American all singing together – brought tears]

3. What does this international assembly look like?

- “clothed in white robes and having palm branches in their hands”

A white robe is symbolic of purity, and palm branches picture joyous celebration.³ At the Israelite Feast of Tabernacles, they made tents with palm roofs to remember how God was their shelter in the wilderness (Leviticus 23:40). Together, the white robes and palm branches are images of victory.⁴

³ Vern Poythress, *The Returning King*, p. 119.

⁴ Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, p. 490.

4. What victory are they celebrating and who are they?
- (v.13) elder asks same question – “Who are these?” Two hints:
 - a. “ones coming out of the great tribulation”
 - phrase used only one other time in NT – Jesus in Matthew 24:21 when his disciples asked about the End of the Story.
 - While it’s possible that this refers to a time of intense suffering directly before Christ’s return, it likely also has broader application to all tribulation from Christ’s ascension to his second coming – which will intensify as his second coming draws near.⁵
 - The great tribulation will only serve to purify the faith of true believers.⁶ Victory.
 - b. “They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (v. 14).
 - Washing white was an OT metaphor for forgiveness (Isaiah 1:18)
 - How were their robes made white? Strange – “in the blood of the Lamb”
 - *There is a fountain filled with blood,
Drawn from Immanuel’s veins,
And sinners plunged beneath that flood
Lose all their guilty stains.*⁷

Have you guessed yet? Who is this multitude?

- All believers throughout the ages – the true Israel – the church of Jesus Christ.⁸ Can you see Abraham and Sarah in the crowd looking around in disbelief? You and I also. [Confession – when singing, often picture a neighbor, friend, or family member who doesn’t know Jesus singing

⁵ G.K. Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*, p. 163.

⁶ Beale, p. 158-159.

⁷ William Cowper, *There is a Fountain*, 1772.

⁸ G.K. Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*, p. 154, 156.

with me – long for them to be there on that day. Who do you picture there?]

- B. (v. 11) Angels – “all the angels”
- C. “elders” – not elders at Altadena Valley
- D. “four living creatures” – jaw-dropping heavenly beings (Rev 4:6)
Notice – v. 11 – “around the throne” – fixated on the final characters:
- E. God and the Lamb, who we know from Revelation 5 as Jesus [We have the characters, now for the action]

II. The Action: What Will We Be Doing?

A. Single Obsession

- (v. 9) the multitude of believers is “standing before the throne and before the Lamb”
- Notice their body language – all angled towards the throne.

Fixated on God and on the Lamb.

B. Single Theme

- (v.10) – “crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”
- Even though from all different nations and languages, one Theme: **Salvation – the God who saves**
- Why theme? Salvation is what we’ll all share in common
- And it will finally be complete: We experienced the *power* of salvation when God justified us; we experience the *outworking* of salvation as God sanctifies us; on that day, we’ll experience the *full effect* of salvation when God glorifies us.

The good work God began in us will be finally and forever completed on that day (Philippians 1:6).

So Blake, you’re telling me that what we’ll be doing in heaven is standing before the throne crying out praise for God’s salvation?

Yes and no. Yes, I believe there will be much of that. But I don’t think that’s what this passage is saying.

I think the point is that in heaven, no matter what we're doing, we will have a single obsession: God and the Lamb, and a single theme: his salvation.

[Finally, we can't forget the setting]

III. The Setting: What Will It Be Like?

(vv.15-17) describe the setting – loaded with fulfillment of OT prophecy – what all history has been waiting for.

Setting short answer: In God's presence, experiencing his care.⁹

(v. 15) “before the throne of God, serving him day and night in his temple” – fulfillment of Daniel 7:14 – all believers will be God's new priesthood serving in his eternal temple.¹⁰

- “shelter them with his presence” – shelter = “to encamp,” “to dwell”¹¹ – literally, “spread his tabernacle/tent over them”¹²

Heaven will be the ultimate Feast of the Tabernacles celebration and God himself is the tent. As God says in Ezekiel 37:27, “My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

Setting: In God's very presence – no longer seeing in a mirror dimly, but face to face (I Corinthians 13:12).

Setting also: Experiencing his care.

(v. 16) no hunger, no thirst, no sun striking, no scorching heat – almost direct quote of Isaiah's picture of the restored Israel in Is. 49:9-10.

Why no hunger, thirst, etc?

(v. 17) Because the Lamb will care for them

⁹ Beale, p. 159.

¹⁰ Beale, p. 160.

¹¹ Zerwick, *Grammatical Analysis of the Greek NT*, p. 754.

¹² Ross, p. 490.

- Lamb “in midst” – “center” – position of God – highlighting divinity
- “Lamb will be their shepherd” – head scratcher – like robe washed white in blood – good thing about a Lamb for a shepherd: he could lay down his life on behalf of the sheep (John 10:11).
- What will this Lamb-Shepherd do? “guide them to springs of living water” – like the Shepherd in Psalm 23 – “beside still waters”

I can see the woman at the well pointing to the Lamb and saying, “Drink of him and trust me, you’ll never thirsty again!”

- Final act of care: “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”
- What causes tears in this life?
Direct quote from Isaiah 25:8 – “He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces.”
[Tuesday: riding w/ guys and rear-ended by 18 wheeler – no one hurt. Truck Driver – trucker friend went off road last week and went to his memorial service night before. His 21-yr-old grandson dying from heart failure. Hospital told them to make arrangements.]

DEATH. Something we’re all too familiar with, will be gone. There’ll be no more tears because there will be no more death.

Please pray for this truck driver and his grandson – not sure if they know Jesus.

Setting summary: no more hunger, thirst, sun, scorching heat, tears – sounds like Israel’s wilderness wanderings; Instead will have God’s intimate presence, shepherd leading to springs of living water – sounds like Promised Land.

This is the ultimate Feast of Tabernacles – out of wilderness of sin and death and into the Land of Promise.

A multiethnic multitude with one obsession – God and the Lamb – and one theme – salvation.

This word salvation can also mean “victory.”¹³ This is how the Story ends. Christ wins. Darkness falls. Death dies. Tribulation purifies. Robes white. The Lamb is the shepherd. Victory. Victory!

Brother and sister, take heart! Do not search for heaven on earth.

Take heart! The Victor makes all things new.

Once in his presence, we will find that the end is only the beginning.

Sometimes it helps to read the end of the story first.

¹³ Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, p. 199.