

May 12, 2019, Revelation 7:9-17, "Mother's Day Revelation", Rev. Pat Weatherwax

PROLOGUE

A few years ago the Presbyterian Women, throughout the USA did their *Horizons* Bible Study on the Book of the Revelation. Along with that, a bookmark was created that gave "Guiding Principals" (*sic*) about the interpretation of the words of this book, words that sometimes are confusing and complicated. One of the six tips was: "Embrace the message of hope not fear". Another said: "Look beyond the literal approach". Today we are looking at the hope and principles from Revelation 7:9-17. Earlier in this chapter it outlines specific numbers of people, sealed for heaven, but then verse 9 says the number is "not countable". Revelation's like that.

Just to note, the victory and hope in Revelation come from a heavenly perspective. In human terms all these victors have died. That's not exactly an earthly indicator of success or winning. Also we realize we can't reduce the complicated, colorful imagery from the Revelation to simple black and white, yes or no. Medical professionals and farmers know that it's illogical to "wash your garments in the blood of the lamb", to make them dazzling white. Revelation's like that.

We use our God-given brains when we are considering our huge God and the book of Revelation. We give careful consideration to what the text means, and especially how these ancient words correlate with "other teachings" we've come to accept. Hear the word of the LORD from Revelation 7:9-17. ...

INTRODUCTION

In the Sermon on the Mount, recorded in Matthew 5, Jesus was teaching that loving God and loving others, were the most important commandments. He challenged his audience, saying that *love* was superior to their social norms and rabbinical laws. In that sermon, six different times, it's recorded that Jesus said things like: (Matt 5:43-45)

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' **But I say to you,** Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. (Wow, Jesus! What you say is hard, sometimes.)

When reading this lectionary text for today, Revelation 7, *that* form of teaching from Jesus, the challenging teachings of "not that, but this", surfaced.

For example, maybe we have heard it said:

1. Indigenous peoples need to be converted, preferably to be Presbyterians.
Revelation 7:9 says: there was "a multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne."
"from every nation, from **all** tribes and peoples"

Not from **some**. Not just those from groups that have heard the amazing Easter message, and understood it in our egocentric way. Maybe we *are* going to have ethnicity in heaven. If so, there we will be from every nation, from **all** tribes and peoples and languages. The PCUSA.org website has great explanations of our call to share the good news of Christ's love, world-wide. It says:

“With integrity we can consider responding to human need, building sustainable community, and social transformation as intentions of mission. However, the ultimate end of every kind of mission activity is the consummation of God's reign, where Jesus Christ is Lord of **all** forever.”

We will see evidence of that, when we see those from **all** tribes and peoples as our brothers and sisters, on earth, as it is in Heaven.

Here's another one. We have heard it said:

2. You pray a certain specific prayer, in order to be saved.

Revelation 7:10 says: “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” “Salvation belongs to **our God**”

This is a significant distinction in the reformed theology we profess. Our eternal destiny does not rest in our hands, in our accepting Jesus by praying the right way. It rests completely in God's control. Sometimes this gets labeled “predestination”, but it really is about God's authority. Do you think you could be excluded from eternal life on a technicality? Or included because you said the appropriate words? Are you more powerful than God? No, friends. Salvation belongs to **our God**, and to the lamb.

You have heard it said:

3. In Heaven we will be reunited with our loved ones. Revelation 7, in verse 11 says: “They fell on their faces before the throne and **worshipped** God,”

Our purpose in the heavenly realm is to *worship* our creator. We don't know how that all works, but heaven is about God, not about our reunions. The Sadducees tried to push this point with Jesus (recorded in Matthew 22:23- 30 NRSV)

Some Sadducees came to Jesus, saying there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, saying, “Teacher, Moses said, ‘If a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother.’ Now there were seven brothers...; the first married, and died childless ...The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh. ... In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her.”

Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are *like* angels in heaven.

We are not going to be angels, but will be like angels, worshipping God. We *are* reunited, in heaven, reunited with *God*. With God, for sure. The rest, we will have to wait to see. Not that we won't, but our purpose will be to "worship God forever."

At the funeral of an older gentleman, a devoted daughter, eulogizing her father, said that her parents were now "walking hand in hand in heaven". The thing is, her stepmom, dad's long-time second wife, was sitting in the front row grieving, and feeling like she was being cheated on, with God's permission. Let's wait for this to be revealed. Like the Apostle Paul said:

"Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that we know now is partial and incomplete, but then we will know everything completely, just as God now knows us completely." (1 Cor 13:12 NLT)

Some of you know the old hymn: "God Be with You, 'Till We Meet Again". The chorus says: 'Till we meet, 'till we meet, 'till we meet at Jesus' feet". Interestingly the chorus part about meeting at Jesus' feet is not in our *Glory to God hymnal*, or we would have sung it this morning. Because that's what heaven is about- Rev. 7:11: they fell on their faces before the throne and **worshipped** God.

You have heard it said:

4. Christians are especially blessed. Revelation 7, verse 14 says: These around the throne of God, are they who have come out of the great ordeal; "have come out of the great **ordeal**."

Now there are varying theological viewpoints about what this is, and how it's explained. Is the great ordeal our typical human condition of ups and downs? Or is it something more, and worse? Some traditions translate this as the "Great Tribulation" assigning timelines and definitions. Other English Bible translations use suffering, distress, persecution, hardship, affliction, difficulty, oppression. Whatever it *is*, that we face on this earth, it doesn't sound like sunshine and puppy dogs. Discussions of the time frames are called eschatology, millennial theories, the end-times. Are we in this time of ordeal, now? Is it still to come? How long will it last? Will believers be spared, and when? When will Christ "come again to judge the quick and the dead"? A pastor/peer in Kalamazoo describes himself as "pan-millennial". In God's timing and planning, it will all pan out. Let's leave this in God's hands, too.

Only the most naive Christ follower thinks there's a supernatural bubble that protects us. Besides that initial text from the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus said: God has "his sun rise on the evil and on the good", nearing his betrayal and execution, Jesus said it this way:

"... you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world." (John 16:33).

5. Maybe you have heard it said, or sung by a country singer, there are “holes in the floor of heaven” and rain is our loved ones’ “tears are pouring down”. Can our loved ones feel for us; can they see us from heaven? What does Revelation say? Thankfully, on this, the text seems clear: “And God will **wipe every** tear from their eyes“

Verse 17: the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

God wiping away our every tear is also in Revelation, 21:4. It’s part of the funeral committal liturgy, usually quoted at cemeteries. NOT that God will wipe away our tears, *here*. That’s for the next life. (Isaiah 24:8 says this, too.) If those in heaven felt our sadness and knew our pain, they probably would share our tears, wouldn’t they?

John Piper, a respected reformed theologian, speaking to this idea of heavenly sympathy wrote:

“... all speculation about such things for the sake of strengthening our souls, is a spiritual detour off the main highway of God’s blessing and comfort and strength and hope. The highway is what he has revealed in the Bible and it is glorious beyond words” (desiringGod.org).

Instead, on earth, we know what the Psalmist professed:

“The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; God rescues those whose spirits are crushed.” (Psalm 34:18)

CONCLUSION

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ***But Jesus says to you***, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

What do we do with all our questions, especially when we know there may be contradictions in our teachings? When it doesn’t seem fair? In her final book, “Inspired”, Rachel Held Evans, a respected Christian writer, who recently died at age 37, wrote:

Jesus invites us into a story that is bigger than ourselves, bigger than our culture, bigger even than our imaginations, and yet we get to tell that story ((with the scandalous particularity of our particular moment and place in time)). We are storytelling creatures because we are fashioned in the image of a storytelling God. May we never neglect the gift of that. May we never lose our love for telling the tale.

I love to tell the story of God’s eternal love, and also to surrender to not knowing all the answers, right now.

Do you?