

Revelation 7:9-17

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[0 : 0 0] Let me just read the first few verses of this passage once again and then share some thoughts with you about it. Revelation chapter 7 and verse 9. Remember that Revelation was written by the disciple John, who was one of Jesus' disciples, but this was long after Jesus had died and risen again and gone back to heaven. You remember that years afterwards, John was the last remaining disciple and he was in exile. He was isolated. We all know what isolated means.

He was isolated on the island of Patmos in the Mediterranean Sea. And he felt it. He felt that terrible sense of loss in not being able to communicate with his fellow Christians. And in prison, on Patmos alone, he didn't know what was going on. For all the world, it appeared as if things were on the decline, that the church was declining, the church was under threat.

Was there going to be any future to the gospel anymore? The gospel that had started off so promisingly on the day of Pentecost when 3,000 people had been converted. And as the disciples moved off and as they preached in various towns and villages, the gospel just took off, sometimes more, sometimes less. But it seemed to take off at least for a few years. But now things had reversed.

It appeared to John anyway. And now, once again, the disciples were being persecuted. He was the only one that was left. Every one of the disciples had been put to death because of their faith in Jesus except him. And he probably wondered, why was he the only one that was left? So, there were all kinds of discouragements coming to him. And this is when God spoke to him in a most spectacular way. The book of Revelation is God's answer to his distress. God's answer to his loneliness. God's answer to his isolation. And God's answer was just when he thought that things were looking gloomy for the church, in actual fact, it was only the beginning. God was going to do something absolutely marvelous, greater than he had ever imagined. That's what the book of Revelation is all about.

And in trying to understand it, and many as an hour has been spent, many as a page has been written by those who have tried to understand the book of Revelation, in trying to understand it, we've got to keep certain things in mind. One of them is, what would this message have meant to John?

[2 : 5 9] Because that's who it was given to at the very beginning. And God's message was a series of visions that reinforced to John what God was doing in the world, and that reinforced the fact, the truth, that whatever things appeared on the outside, whatever persecution and trouble there was, God was going to build his church, and nothing was going to stop it.

And 2,000 years later, we can look back at John's isolation, his loneliness, his sense of discouragement, and we can almost say, I wonder why he was so discouraged. Because we can look around us at the world, and the millions of Christians that are in the world, that doesn't make it easy to be a Christian, but it means that God is well on the way to fulfilling his plan, the plan that he started through John and through the rest of the disciples at this very beginning. So, here's one of the visions that John's visions that John sees. Verse 9, after this, I looked, and there before me was a great multitude. Picture this, close your eyes, as we listen to this. There before me was a great multitude. Imagine a great multitude that no one could count from, and this multitude is not just innumerable, but they are from every nation, every tribe, every people, and language. But they're not gathered somewhere on earth.

They are gathered before the throne. So, this is a heavenly vision. John is able to see beyond this world, and he sees into heaven. And they're standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. We'll come on to that in a few moments. They were wearing white robes, and they 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. I could read the rest of it, but we'll just leave it there. So, here is this massive multitude of people, and they're in heaven. Now, I don't know how much time you ever spend thinking about heaven. If you're a Christian this evening, I hope you do, because no matter how much we're attached to this world, and we are, come on, let's face it, we're all attached to the people in this world, to our families, to our friends, to our places of work, to our homes. We are attached to this world, and we're thankful for what God has given us in this world. But it's all going to come to an end, because God is preparing us for heaven, for eternity. We believe with all our hearts, we don't know how it's going to happen, we don't know the details, we don't know the science, but we believe that one day God will raise the dead. Even those who have been dead for thousands of years, somehow

He's going to reconstitute their bodies. Whatever happens to the body, God is going to reconstitute our bodies, and He's going to raise our bodies when Jesus comes again. And that will inaugurate the beginning of the new heavens and the new earth, where the dwelling of God will be with man, will be with humankind, those who have died and been raised again in Jesus. So, God has a great future for the human race, for you, for me, who believe in Jesus. And just because we can't understand heaven doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. And it doesn't mean that we shouldn't believe in it. Because the reason, let me put it this way, the reason I believe in heaven is because I believe in this world.

I believe in this universe. This universe is reality to me, because of what I can see and sense and hear and feel around me. This universe, this world, is all I know. It's all you know. We believe in it.

[7 : 38] But when you come to remember that this universe was created by an act of God, in which at some point in time, God said, let there be, and it came to pass. Again, I don't know the science. I don't know the mechanism. I wasn't there at the time. But I believe that we are here because of the will and the purpose of God. Now, if God is all-powerful, then why can he not create another dimension that we know nothing about? A parallel universe, if you want to put it in scientific terms. Why is that so impossible to believe? It's not if you believe in the impossible God, in the God who is eternal, who has no beginning, who has no end, who is all-powerful, and who brought everything that we cannot understand about this world and this universe into being and understands it perfectly.

Why can we not believe in a parallel existence? That's what I believe heaven is. I believe it exists right now as a parallel existence. And I believe that the Bible is clear that those who have died believing in Jesus are there right now. Their bodies have been buried, but their souls, whatever that means, are with Jesus. They are there in that parallel universe. And I believe that this is part of the message that John is getting from Jesus as he reflects on his loneliness and his isolation on the Isle of Patmos.

There is a place, and it is a real place, because God has created it just as he has created this world. And it's a place that has an eternal future, because it's not been infected with all that this world has been infected with. You know, of course, the Bible tells us that disease and sickness and badness and corruption came into this world because our first parents rebelled. And at that moment, a separation was created between God and this world. Well, there's no such separation in heaven, and there never will be. It is a perfect, the perfect, blissful, ultimate place. Don't ask me where it is. I don't even think you can answer that question. But I believe that there's enough evidence in Revelation to believe that one day that it will be a recreated earth, when this world as we know it will be destroyed, and God recreates a new heaven and a new earth. And there will be that physicality about it that you and I know, because we'll be raised with physical bodies, physical bodies that will live in a physical place, except it will be perfect. It will be flawless. And there will be none of the spoilers in this world. And there are many spoilers in this world, some of them annoying and some of them devastating. There will be none of that in heaven. But I want you to notice that heaven is not going to be populated by a few. Do you notice how many people there are? There is a multitude that no one can number. Where did you hear that before? You know your Old Testament. You'll know that that was a promise that God gave to Abraham way at the very beginning, when he said to him that his descendants would be like the stars of the sky and the sand of the seashore, innumerable.

So that's the first thing that impresses me about this. I don't understand this. I don't understand at what period of time this is going to be, if we can talk about time. But I do know this, that heaven is populated by a massive number of people. People who lived at one time in this world, some of them died at a ripe old age, some of them died young, some of them died in infancy, some of them died before they were even born.

Think of that. Think of the millions of unborn who have died. Now, I don't know about you, but I believe that as soon as that person leaves this world, they go straight to be with God.

[12 : 51] So there's this multitude of people who reminds me again of the purpose of the New Testament, the confident, universal, worldwide plan of God, which is to preach the gospel to every nation and tribe and people. That's what Jesus told his disciples just before. He ascended to heaven once again. He told them to go into all the world and to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. It's a promise that you'll find actually, surprisingly, all the way through the Bible. It's a promise that you find in the Psalms. We just sung one of the Psalms. Did you notice Psalm 100? It's such a well-known Psalm, isn't it? Why is it so, so glorious? Why do we love to sing it? So, because it is so universal. Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. That doesn't just mean a few people here and there all over the world geographically.

It looks forward to a moment in time when loads of people will shout for joy to the Lord. So, remember that the next time you sing Psalm, whenever we're able to sing it, next time we sing Psalm 100, we're actually asking for something really big. We're asking that the day will come when the whole world will praise God. Do you believe that can happen? Do you believe that can happen? Do you believe that the gospel can reach the whole world? Do you believe that God is powerful enough to change not just a few people in the world, not just a remnant, not just half a dozen, but do you believe that God is powerful enough to reach millions and millions and millions of people in a winner?

You're thinking, whoa, that really would be something, wouldn't it? That really would be something. We've never seen anything like that, have we? But you remember what happened on the day of Pentecost in one sermon, one sermon, the apostle people, remember what happened? He stood up, he spoke to them. How many people were converted in one second? Three thousand people. Now, that's what God's capable of. And then there was, then there was, in Acts chapter 11, Antioch. Remember that?

I think Clive had it a couple of weeks ago. He spoke about it a couple of weeks ago. It's one of the the great, the great, the great, uh, uh, unsung chapters of the Bible where the, where there's, there's, where, where loads of people all of a sudden come to faith.

Then there's Acts chapter 8. You remember the Samaritans where, where Philip goes and starts preaching Jesus and all of a sudden these crowds of people, they come out of nowhere and they're changed. That's what God can do. And just because he's not doing it right now in Aberdeen or in Glasgow or in Edinburgh does not mean that he cannot do it and that he is not powerful enough to do it.

[16 : 26] He may not do it in our lifetime. We might be talking a hundred, two hundred, a thousand years from now. We don't know. But don't be too overcome by what's happening right now. We might be in the minority right now. What? This is, that's exactly where John was. He was in the minority. He was on his own. It looked as if all the odds were against him. It looks as if the church was declining.

And look at what God did after John. And what could God do after us? There is an innumerable number of people. Let's keep on keeping on. Let's ask God to do great things. Let's ask God to pour out his spirit and to reach people with the gospel. Moving on, what are these people doing? These people are, they are, they are worshipping. These are real people. These are people who have lived in this world.

Many of them lived long. They lived many years in this world. They went through all kinds of difficulties and frustrations and troubles and sadnesses in this world. Many of them were persecuted because they were Christians. And if we were to go into heaven this evening and talk to these people, they would have several things in common. Not one of them would ever want to come back into this world.

And that doesn't mean they didn't love their families. It didn't mean their families were not heartbroken when they died, but none of them would ever, ever want to come into this world. And that's because they have experienced now something that is so spectacular and so new and so perfect that nobody ever wants to come into this world. The second thing that they have in common is that there isn't a single bored person amongst them. You know, one of the greatest signs that there are of sin in this world is boredom. You ever thought of that? Boredom is one of the great marks of sin in this world.

And by that, I mean that it doesn't matter what it is, you'll get bored with it. It doesn't matter how joyful an experience it is, you'll get fed up of it. It's true, isn't it? And it's the reason why people live from one excitement to another. It's because whatever excitement it is, it just fades away. But there is no boredom in heaven. That's because God says, I make all things new. In other words, every day, if I can talk about days, I don't even know if I can even talk about days. Every day is a new day. Everything that is seen, everything that is experienced is brand new. Nothing fades away. Nothing becomes less exciting. Nothing becomes less interesting. Everything at all times is a complete thrill. And I don't mean that in some superficial sense. I don't mean that people are in some kind of ecstasy. That's not the way it is.

[19 : 55] It is an intelligent joy. A joy that is full of perfect contentment. And that contentment rests in God. Because that's what they were created for in the first place. If we hadn't blown it at the very beginning through Adam and Eve, the human race could have found continued contentment in God.

And so God is recreating what he created in the first place, except this time there's a guarantee it will never go wrong the way it went wrong the first time.

But it's interesting, isn't it, that they are worshipping. And we can't really relate to that, can we? Because for us, worship is so easily spoiled.

With the best will in the world. Worship can become a chore to us. And I'm just being honest with you, I mean, I'm just reflecting, I'm just, I've lived long enough in this world to know that worship is a discipline. You get up on a Sunday morning and you think, do I really want to go to church? Is my heart really filled with the kind of anticipation that it ought to be when I'm coming to meet with other people, to sing God's praises, to hear God's word, to hear, to be challenged and be encouraged by it? No, it's not. Not always. Sometimes there are. Sometimes in our lives when we feel like that, but not always. More often than not, it's a discipline. We go to church because, well, we know it's the right thing to do. And very often by doing that, actually God's word does speak to you and you go home and you think, I'm glad I came here. But I know it from a preacher's perspective because I can see people having preached many, many times. I know that people get weary because it's something that they've done over and over again, time and again. But worship in heaven will be perfect. And every occasion of worship, if I can even talk in these terms, will be one which is more thrilling than the last because worship will never be boring. It will never be tedious.

It will never be a discipline. It will be one continuous, perfect outpouring of praise to God.

[22 : 45] And these people are also serving God. You notice that when we read there, therefore they are before the throne of God and they serve Him day and night in His temple. In other words, they're not just standing there in some kind of ecstatic pose. They're not paralyzed. They're doing stuff. They're doing stuff that they love. They are serving God because they love God. And every moment, if I can talk like that, is a thrilling moment, one which they are, and the next five minutes are going to be even more thrilling because they love every moment of it.

I don't have to tell you that work in this world can be tedious. Some of you may be dying to get to work tomorrow morning. You can't wait until Monday morning, but chances are you're not. The chances are that there'll be that feeling tomorrow morning and think, oh no, do I have to do this? How many years till I retire? There's that person that you've fallen out with, that person who's giving you grief.

You don't get on with somebody at work or it's become boring to you. It's become unexciting. You're only doing it because you know there's a means to earn a living for yourself or for your family.

But when we talk about work in heaven, there is a perfection that we've never experienced before because, and there is a joy that we've never experienced in any working environment in this world.

[24 : 29] And then lastly, I want you to notice their dress. They are dressed in white. Their robes are white. And what that means is it's an indication of what brings them all together, what they have in common. You have to remember that when you try to read the book of Revelation, that it's symbolic. So when we read that they are dressed in robes, that doesn't necessarily refer to something physical, some kind of physical clothing. It says something about them. Your robes in the Bible were a symbol of who you were. Your dress spoke of who you were.

And the feature here, the unique feature here is that they are white because that's how John identifies with them. And that's why he asked the question, these in white robes, who are they and where did they come from? And I answered, sir, you know. And he said, these are they who have come out of the tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

So what we're looking at here is a kind of uniform, if you like. It's something that tells us who they were and something that binds them all together. And it is simply this, that they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Now, let me explain what that means.

The Lamb, capital L, is code for the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

The Lamb of God is a title that was given to Jesus. So when we read the Lamb, we're talking about Jesus, the Lamb of God who gave himself, whose blood was shed at Calvary. And so when we read about robes being washed in the blood, I know it's a bit of a contradiction, isn't it? If you wash a robe in blood, it doesn't become white, it becomes red. So that's why I know this is symbolic. It's not literal.

[27 : 00] It's not to be taken literally. But we're to imagine these people having washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb and they become white, which is code for the death of Jesus and its effect on people, on these people. These are people who have had a special relationship with the Lamb of God, in which they have come to faith in Him and in His death on the cross. They've come to believe that He died for them as the sacrifice for their sin. And that's what the good news in the Bible is all about. The good news that tells us that Jesus died instead of us, that He took the punishment that we deserved so that we could be made clean from all our sin. And this is the Bible's message to you tonight.

Whatever you've done, whatever you've done in this life, whatever mess you've made of your life, Jesus can clean you. He can wash you. He can purge you. He can purify you. He can give you a new beginning. That's why He died on the cross. He took your punishment, the punishment that you deserved.

Do you see that? Do you know it for yourself? Have you experienced it? Have you come to faith in Jesus? That's the only way to heaven and the only way to God.

And I want to tell you one more time what's something that's been said hundreds, thousands of times from this place. That's what this place is all about. That's what this church is all about. It's all about Jesus. It's not all about, it's not about a bunch of people who think they're better than anyone else. We don't. We're a bunch of people who want to share the greatest message in the world that Jesus died to clean us, to give us newness of life, and to give us everlasting life.

And if you've never heard that before, I rejoice in being able to tell it. I'm so privileged in being able to tell you this for the very first time.

[29 : 48] And our prayer is that you will not only listen, but that you will believe that you will come to Jesus, come to faith in Him, so that your life can be changed by His power. Only God can change you. Only God can make you into a new person. And only God can bring you into His kingdom. All of these people, the reason they are in heaven is because they've come to faith in Jesus Christ. And that's what the symbol of washing your robe in the blood of the Lamb means. Now, I want us, just in the next five minutes or so, to take from this what this heavenly vision means for our earthly lives. Because I want us to remember that there is a connection between what's going on in heaven and what goes on in the world.

We're not in heaven. We have to live in this world. We have to live from day to day. I don't know how long we will be in this world. Don't ever assume that it will be very long. We don't know. But we want to make the most, don't we? As God's people, we want to make the most of our lives. We want to live our lives to His glory. And I believe that there are four symbols here, the four that we've already seen, that not only help us to understand what's going on in heaven, but that help us to live our lives here in this world. First of all, we spoke about not only the great number of people that were in heaven, but the diversity that there was. These were people from all over the world. They were from every nation, tribe, people, and language. And that's because whoever people are in the world, they are made in the image of God, which elevates humanity above every other, every other creature and every other piece of creation.

It gives us a respect for who human beings are. And Christians, more than anyone else, can have that respect. I hope we always have had that respect because we're told to love our neighbor.

We're told to reach out to our neighbor. We're told to share the faith that we have in Jesus with those around us. No matter who they are, no matter where they've come from, no matter what people group they're from, there is to be no discrimination, because every man and woman is made in the image of God.

And that's why human life matters, wherever it comes, wherever you find it, because God says it does. And then we notice that these people were worshiping.

[33 : 10] And heavenly worship ought to be an empowerment and a reminder of how we should worship. We should take our cue from the glory of God in heaven.

And our worship on earth should reflect in some way the joy and the continuity that there ought to be in heaven. So, let's put more effort into our work. And I'm talking to myself, by the way. I'm not just talking to you.

But let's remind ourselves that one day, as believers in Jesus, we're going to spend the whole of eternity worshiping. So, why not prepare for it now by making sure we make the most of what we're doing today?

And make sure it's not just something we do as a habit, but something that we prepare for, and we put some thought into, and we pray about. For how many of us is coming through that door just as Sunday routine.

We do it because we do enjoy meeting one another again, especially after lockdown. It's great to see one another again. And that's part of it, is fellowship with other people.

[34 : 24] That's an important part of it. But what about when we're listening to God's word, when we're together, when we're praying together? Do we prepare for that?

Do we ask that God will make every element, every component in our worship meaningful to us, and that God will send us out strengthened and encouraged and challenged, ready to serve Him again?

Do we come through that door, ready to be changed, prepared for God to speak to us? Worship is central in the life of every believer.

And so, heavenly worship ought to inform, and it ought to empower our worship here in this world. And then, the fact that we are serving, that the people in heaven will serve God day and night, is a reminder that work is actually good.

And it means that work is good in this world because God created us to work. And when we remember that, perhaps, if you wake up tomorrow, God willing, and you remember that I'm not just going out to work to earn a living, I'm going out to work to fulfill a purpose that God has given me.

[35 : 56] And I'm going to go out to work to serve God. Even in this imperfect world, where there's going to be all kinds of challenges and difficulties, particularly with COVID and all the challenges that that brings, and when you have to work in a place where there are difficult people to get on with, remember that we're serving God and that we're here because God has led us into this place.

This place will work, and who knows what he's going to do through you in future and your witness. Let's be positive about what we do in this world.

It's not just a necessary evil. Work is good. It's what we were created to do.

Let's do everything. What was it Paul says? Do everything to the glory of God. And then lastly, the dress was white robes.

Let's make sure that we are a forgiven people. And there's only one place where forgiveness is found, in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[37 : 14] That's what it's all about. His ongoing, continuous, renewed forgiveness. Are you backslidden tonight? Have you allowed yourself to drift from where you should be in the Christian life?

You feel that there's no way back? You feel that you've drifted beyond the point of redemption? Not true. The Christian life is full of new beginnings.

Let this be a new beginning this evening. Let me remind you of the God who says that if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will pardon us and cleanse us from all unrighteous.

There's only one place where that cleansing, you can have that cleansing, and that is in the blood of Jesus. What is it that John says? The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. Come back to it right now.

Come back to it. Take hold of it. Believe in what Jesus has done. Are you not a Christian this evening?

[38 : 16] I hope you realize what you're missing when you read the great promise that God has given to all those who trust in Jesus.

And I hope you're asking yourself, well, how do I get to heaven? Where's the door? Where's the door? That's the most important question you could ask this evening. Where's the door?

Let me tell you. Jesus is the door. The door is not doing your best. The door is not faithfully coming to church.

The door is not putting the money in the plate in the church. The door is not making sure that you are as helpful a person as possible to do your best and hope for the rest. No, no, that's not the door. That will give you no assurance whatsoever.

Jesus is the door. Jesus is the door. And so maybe tonight is the first time that you're going to pray, Jesus, please come into my life.

[39 : 30] Please make me see and understand and accept all that the Bible tells me about how I can be saved and how I can make sure that when the time comes, I'll be there.

Our Father in heaven, we thank you for our time together. We pray that you will speak to each one of us wherever we are this evening. We pray that your word will speak to us powerfully.

And we pray that we may see your grace and your forgiveness as never before in Jesus' name. Amen.