



“The Church Without Borders”

Revelation 7:1-4, 9-17

Here’s the question of the day: Who can withstand God’s judgment?

The Great Multitude. The Church Universal. The Church without borders.

This week we return to the throne room and the Lamb of God, the only One worthy to open God’s scroll.

When the Lamb takes the scroll, he begins to open one seal after another. The first seal brings forth a rider with a bow, the second a rider with a sword. The opening of the third seal sets loose a rider bringing economic devastation. And the fourth seal brings a rider on a pale horse; it is Death. Each of these brings us nothing new, nothing of which we don’t already have plenty by our own doing.

The fifth seal

The opening of the fifth of the seven seals doesn’t bring another rider, but, instead, shifts our attention to the altar in the throne room. There, we now see, are Christian martyrs hiding underneath the altar. John tells us that these are the souls of believers who have been killed because of their testimony.

There is only one thing these martyrs want to know. How long?! How long?! How long until God’s redemptive work is done? How long until justice “rolls on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream” (Amos 5:24)?

Yes, the martyrs desire vengeance for the blood that has been spilled, the lives cut short. Of course they do. Though Jesus calls us to forsake vengeance, the truth is that revenge lies close to our hearts. From beginning to end, the Bible is honest, if nothing else. Scripture doesn’t ignore our deepest and even our darkest desires. The martyrs want vengeance, and we must acknowledge that reality if Revelation is going to make sense to us. It is their book too.

So their cry rings out: How long?! These martyrs are told to “wait a little longer” (6:11) But why should they wait for the fulfillment of God’s promises to them? Why can’t the suffering end immediately? What point could there possibly be in letting things drag out? We’ll have to wait until the eleventh chapter to get some answers to those questions.

The sixth seal

The martyrs wait under the altar in the throne room, the victims of humans’ judgment. Now those who rendered that judgment must stand under God’s judgment.

The story of the sixth seal is told in towering cosmic terms taken from Isaiah, Joel and Amos. As the sky falls, the sun turns black, and all the earth is in upheaval, kings and generals, the rich and powerful, and all those who’ve embraced and perpetuated the ways of a fallen world, run and hide. Of course, there is nowhere to hide. The entire earth has been scrubbed flat. In the powerful imagery of Revelation, all the mountains and islands of the earth have been removed. There are simply no hiding places left (though mountains and caves mysteriously reappear in verse 15¹). Besides, could one ever hope to hide from God?

As the martyrs cry out, “How long ‘til God’s justice rolls?,” the kings of the earth cry out, “Who can withstand the judgment of God?”

The kings are about to get their answer.

The Great Multitude

Though we’d expect the seventh seal to be opened at this point, instead John sees angels at the four corners of the earth and another holding up God’s seal. Such seals were used in the ancient world to authenticate documents, to mark

¹ This is one of the numerous times in Revelation it is clear that the story is not linear, nor are these events something a video camera could capture. We are told that the earth is scrubbed flat and then in the next breath, the kings and generals are hiding in mountains and caves. Revelation is not akin to a movie script!!

them as belonging truly to the sender. The seals were distinctive, one person to the next. And the seal the angel holds belongs to the LORD God Almighty.

John then hears the number of 144,000 persons who are sealed with the seal held by the angel. $144,000 = 1,000 \times 12 \times 12$. A thousand was about as high as numbering went with the Jews. “Myriad” was higher, but a thousand was most often used to convey a really, really large quantity – not the specific number between 999 and 1001. As with the 24 elders, the two “12’s” here probably speak to the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles. John may have something else in mind, but given what happens next, this explanation makes the most sense.

The interpretive key here is found in chapter 5. There John wonders whether anyone will be found who is worthy to open the scroll. One of the twenty-four elders gathered around the throne tells John of the Lion of Judah. But when John turns to look, he sees the Lamb. John hears about a lion, but sees a lamb. Jesus is both the Lion of Judah and the Lamb of God.

The same sequence is found here in chapter 7. John hears the number of the 144,000 (12,000 from each of Israel’s twelve tribes) but then looks and sees a “great multitude.” Hears and then sees. The great multitude is robed in white, made white by being washed in the blood of the Lamb. They are also waving palm branches (yes, think Palm Sunday). And the multitude is comprised of “every nation, tribe, people, and language.” God’s salvation is for all, regardless of nationality, race, gender, or anything else – and the great multitude of Revelation 7 portrays that unifying promise.

Just as Jesus is both lion and lamb, the 144,000 and the great multitude are one and the same – *all those who belong to God; i.e., those who have faith in Jesus Christ*. John both hears and sees. And what are the faithful doing? Worshiping God alongside the entire company of heaven. Of course they are.

So . . . to answer the question from 6:17, “Who can withstand the wrath of God?” The answer is that it is this vast multitude, comprised of all God’s people across the vast expanse of time and space. Take a few minutes and read verses 7:14 forward. So many of the Old Testament’s great promises are brought together in these verses, pointing to the future that awaits those who have turned to the one true God. It comes down to this: *if you belong to Christ, you have nothing to fear from the judgment of God*.

We don’t have to make it more complicated than this, though Christians keep trying. John skillfully brings together what you and I would call Old Testament and New Testament imagery to dramatically illustrate that even in the midst of a world turned against God, his people, stretching back to Abraham and forward to Christ’s return, stand united in their commitment to and worship of the LORD God – forever and ever. This vast multitude, stretching across time is what we often call the Church, or even, as we say in the Apostles’ Creed, the “holy catholic Church.”

The catholic/universal² church

Simply put, the church, aka the Body of Christ, is the worldwide community of believers, encompassing not only the living, but the believers who have died. We gather in churches to worship, to pray, to care for one another, and to go about the work given us by Christ. But the church is not the buildings, it is the people. The church includes believers of all the various denominations, large and small, including: Methodist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Southern Baptist, Lutheran, the Church of Christ, and so on.

There are many images of “the church” in the Bible. It is we who are God’s sheep, protected and cared for by the Good Shepherd. We are also, as Paul puts it, the Body of Christ. We are his eyes and his hands and his feet in this world. We are a fellowship that was formed by God, in the person of his Holy Spirit, and is sustained by that same Spirit. Indeed, Paul refers to us as God’s temple, in whom God’s Spirit dwells. We are, as Peter puts it, a “chosen race, a holy nation . . . God’s own people.” And there is only one thing that we have in common, our faith, i.e., our trust, in Jesus Christ. Faith in Jesus Christ is our one and only badge of membership, not race or gender or geography, nor our obedience to a set of rules nor our conformity to a particular set of doctrines.

A holy Church

To say that God is “holy” is to say that God is, well, God. It is God who is inherently holy in Godself; all other holiness is derived from God. Holiness is not an attribute of God. As Aulen put it, “holiness is the foundation on which the whole conception of God rests.” In its magnificent and stirring scenes of worship, the book of Revelation strives to drive home

² In the UMC hymnal, the word “universal” is rightly footnoted as an acceptable substitute for “catholic” which is simply an archaic word for “universal.” The Roman Catholic Church (note the capital letters denoting a proper name) is one part of the larger church universal.

to us that God is truly holy. Further, because God is just and good and righteous, because God is love (1 John 4:8), there is an ethical and moral dimension to holiness.

Thus, all Christians stand with the great multitude, worshiping our Lord and praising the wondrous mercies of God. Mustering all the gratefulness our hearts can offer, we anticipate the day when God will lead us to springs of living water and wipe away every tear from our eyes (Rev. 7:17).

Questions for Reflection

1. So many Christians come to Revelation expecting to find nothing but bizarre monsters, obscure symbols, and terror. We've now been through the first seven chapters, the first third of the book. What has surprised you the most in the chapters? What have been some of your overall impressions so far? What do you think God would want you to most hear from these chapters?
2. What do you make of the statement "There is no healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship with the church?" Do you agree? Has this been your own experience? What does this statement imply about our life in the church? What does it mean to you to think of yourself as part of a family that encompasses all Christians? Jesus certainly thinks that the family of disciples is the family that has first call on our lives (see Matthew 12:46-50, for example).
3. We don't often—or at all—suffer for being Christians in the United States, though many Christians in other places do. How would your reading of Revelation change if you and your family were being persecuted for your faith in Jesus Christ? How can we get emotionally closer to the suffering experienced by these believers?