

How to be Thankful: Peeking into Christmas Future

Revelation 7: 9-17

Joe Bartemus

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes and from where have they come?" I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

*"Therefore they are before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.
They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
the sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."*

(Rev. 7:9-17, ESV)

Introduction

This is a great and challenging season in American culture. We have just finished celebrating Thanksgiving and we are moving quickly into celebrating Christmas. Actually, the commercialism is already in full swing, and the idea of Advent is probably lost as the meaning of Christmas is fogger than ever. I wish the "spirit of thanksgiving" could last a bit longer. I remember a childhood tradition in our family where we went to church every Thanksgiving morning (while the turkey cooked). The auditorium was full, and we heard testimonies of thanks to God for the previous year. Everyone anticipated as Mr. Harkleroad stood every year and told of some incredible stories of God caring for his family through hunting accidents, sickness, financial struggles, etc. Everyone was uplifted and encouraged to focus on the One who is worthy of our highest thanks.

In choosing a passage for this Sunday, I looked for a bridge between Thanksgiving and Advent or Christmas. I came to Revelation 7, where there is a scene of great Thanksgiving, which seems to be associated with the second advent of Jesus (Christmas 2). It is a wonderful picture, which combines truths for today with a brief glimpse into the future.

When coming to a study of Revelation, I am aware that it is not the easiest book to handle. Here are some guidelines to help us navigate the whole book and particularly this passage:

- **Reveal (“apocalypse”) Jesus—leading to perseverance:** The purpose of the book/letter was to reveal Jesus and show His victory over evil, thereby encouraging early Christians to persevere in their faith in Jesus and to unite the church around Jesus. Read chapters 2-3. In the letter to the seven churches, John continually admonishes them to “overcome” and not give up. The title, Revelation, is intended to tell the reader that Jesus is being revealed in this book and that He is the central figure. Evil may seem strong (pictured by a dragon, beasts, a harlot, etc.) but the kingdom of God and of His Christ will reign. So—be encouraged and persevere.
- **Figurative language to represent big concepts:** The style of the book is apocalyptic, and one of the main characteristics of that kind of writing is to use big ideas. The pictures are of a three-dimensional nature, but they are such that you can see an added fourth dimension. Satan is described as a huge and fierce dragon. The reality of the picture is the pervasiveness and horror of evil in a fallen world. The beauty of this kind of language is its ability to express in words pictures that are bigger than we can easily conceive. It is a great way to show the massive influence of evil seen often in Revelation. The judgments of God are expressed in many ways as well—with seal, trumpet and bowl judgments. The judgments increase in intensity, showing God’s patience early but also His seriousness in judging evil. The pictures of God’s victory are also impressive, with the magnitude of His thousand-year reign, the protection of the mark of the Lamb, the streets of gold, and many others. Do not force all the figurative language into a small box, but be ready for mystery and big concepts in reading Revelation—such as the victory of God in the end of the ugly battle with evil. The perseverance of the saints is shown in the hardest of times. The wonders that God has for eternity is beautifully portrayed and in a bigger way than our minds can fully fathom at this time.
- **Already, not yet:** A helpful interpretative principle in Revelation is called the “already, not yet” principle. There are often passages where you will say that this has not happened yet (it is future), but you should also say it has already happened (it has a present importance). In our text the main scene is of a huge crowd worshiping God at His throne. That seems to be future, but there is also a real sense where the people of God should be worshiping Him today *en masse*.

In Revelation 7:9-17 we will discover three major characteristics of a thankful heart

I. The center of a thankful heart is Jesus, 7:9-12

The context of this passage starts in chapter 6. In that chapter the first series of judgments (seals) was initiated, and six of the seven were described. People were calling for mountains to fall on them to escape the great day of the wrath of God. Chapter 7 is an interlude, as a description of the people of God is mentioned with a seal on the 144,000 (very debated as to their identity, but the point is the care of God for His people). Our text describes an innumerable group of diverse people before the throne of God and the Lamb. The picture is stirring and wonderful.

John sees a vision of a huge multitude of people that could not be numbered. There is a beautiful description of this group. They were from all nations, tribes, peoples (used in the OT for the Gentiles), languages (reversal of the evil of Babel in Gen. 11), standing (not sitting or dead, but ready) before the Lamb, clothed in white robes (cleansed), palm branches in their hands (sign of victory). The view must have been overwhelming and impressive. This group then is crying out in a loud voice with a single powerful statement—“**Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!**” The **center** of this impressive scene is similar to chapters 4 and 5. There is a throne and a lamb. The Creator and Redeemer are the focus and center of the scene. It all revolves around the creator/redeemer. The personal pronoun allows the masses to claim Him as “our God.” He is not merely an abstract concept but our personal God. It is easy to get our center wrong in life. We can focus on the trials of life—this multitude had much experience with trials. We can allow jobs, family pleasure to become our center. We will only understand true joy in life when we learn that there is only one center in life, and we will then inevitably be thankful for Him.

The vision progresses as John sees the entourage around the throne fall down on their faces and worship God with a seven-fold praise (doxology) introduced and concluded with a hearty “AMEN” (meaning true or faithful). This group says blessing, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honor, and power and might to this God--forever! It is like the videos where one person starts to sing in a train station or other public place, and then another joins, and finally there is a whole choir singing. This choir is extolling the excellencies of God and of the Lamb. What an impressive sight and sound.

APPLICATION

1. We must get the center of life straight. We were made to worship, and we will worship. We will worship whatever or whoever is at the center of our lives. Many replace the Creator for other centers such as family, pleasure, work, etc. Let Christ be our vision and the center of our lives. We must worship Him for who He is more than for what He has done. A practical suggestion is to get together with the saints and sing and worship on Sunday mornings, just as though it is that great day. We can certainly experience some of the glory of the future today!
2. Let’s start getting ready for Christmas 2 today. Here are some ways: Give to the Christmas offering to see some people from the Yadav people group know Jesus. Get involved in College Park Next Door. Look next door this week for opportunities to help people participate in that great day. Enjoy ethnic and racial variety in the kingdom.

3. When we know that Jesus is the center, we will be thankful for people in all circumstances of life because our center of life is fixed.

II. Be thankful for clinging and cleansing, 7:13-14

The vision continues with one of the angels talking to John and questioning who these white robed people are and from where in the world did they come. John is brilliant and turns the question back to the obviously more informed elder and says he knows. The elder takes the bait and answers in a twofold manner. He says they coming out from the great tribulation. This is a debated occasion. Some see it as totally future, and some see it as indicative of the tribulation that Jesus said will follow all his people. John says in chapter 1:7 that he was in the tribulation similar to many first century Christians. However you interpret this tribulation, the point seems to be that these people did not give up the faith in the times of greatest trial. They persevered. They remind me of the heroes of Hebrews 11 who suffered "mocking and flogging and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, there were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword, they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated of whom the work was not worthy . . ." These people were like them, and like them, they did not desert their Lord or give up their faith.

The elder continues in the description of the myriads around the throne and said they washed their robes white in the blood of the Lamb. It is a common paradox of the Bible. You become alive by death. Dirty robes are cleansed by blood. It makes sense if you are one of the redeemed. The metaphor of the lamb and blood represents the sacrificial death of Jesus, which was the death we should have died. His death was the basis for His ability to forgive His people of their sins as they by faith trust in Him. These people had come to Him for cleansing and trusted in His bloody sacrifice as sufficient to wash away their sins. What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus, and what a great job that blood does in cleansing.

APPLICATION

1. On this Thanksgiving weekend, we, the redeemed, must be thankful for so great a Salvation. If you have nothing else that you can think of to be thankful for, there is not enough thanks to express our gratitude for the cleansing work of the Lamb for you. Another question is *Are you washed in the blood?* Today is the day of salvation. I invite you to partake with the multitude in repentance of sin and trust in Jesus to cleanse you fully from your sin.
2. Holidays can be very difficult for some. I remember the first Christmas after my mom died. She was always fun to buy gifts for because she enjoyed gifts from her loved ones. The difficulty of holidays is overshadowed for our family by the hope that she is in the presence of her Lord where there is joy forever. She awaits her resurrection but she waits with her Savior.

3. Do not miss the statement of perseverance. The days of life temptation and trial can be very long. We must persevere. We have seen the effects of sin in our church body. We have had discipline that removed members. We must persevere in the fight against sin. Remember the sermons on Romans 6 and 7. Those who will be there in the end are those given the grace to persevere.

III. Be thankful for the lifting of the curse, 7:15-17

This short scene at the end of chapter 7 is a beautiful picture. We could take a whole sermon on these few verses. I do not understand all that is contained in these verses. I do know that the big picture is that the curse that has plagued us all the days of our lives and has plagued this world since the fall will one day be lifted. It will be the final restoration of peace and order in the world (Shalom). This state of life will be glorious as all the redeemed will know what it means to do all to the glory of God in life. God will be served, and all His people will be joyful. There is a six-fold description of this state of beautiful peace:

- God will shelter His people with His presence—no harm will come
- They will not hunger or thirst—He meets all their needs—no exceptions
- Sin will not strike them—no source of suffering—it will all be gone
- The Lamb will be their shepherd—the paradox is wonderful, as they will always be in communion with their Savior/ Lamb
- This Lamb will guide them to living waters—ultimate thriving and fulfillment of all that was intended for God’s creation
- Wipe away tears—similar to Rev. 22

What a day that will be. I love the last metaphor. It is not merely a statement of the final wipe of literal tears. It is a statement of a new reality of life. Tears are so common today. Whether you cry or not—there is much pain and suffering. At College Park Church we have had much suffering in 2014. We have seen several deaths, several which seemed premature. We have seen tragedies such as apparently incurable diseases, cancers, people with serious accidents, sickness that seems to last forever, etc. We long for the day when pain and suffering will be no more. You can be thankful because that day is coming. The Lamb, who is the center of our worship and our lives, whose blood cleanses us of our sin, will finish the job. He will cast death and hell into the lake of fire, and the new heaven and earth will have the curse removed. Thank you, Jesus. Come, Lord Jesus, quickly!!

Conclusion: What do we do with this?

1. Take inventory of life today in the season between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Are you ready to join the throngs in praising and thanking the Lamb? If not, get ready. Come to Jesus, who can cleanse you of sin. You will find true joy as the one celebrated in Christmas is the Lamb of God who wants to cleanse you of your sin.

2. As you struggle with pain and suffering, you can experience the comfort of the Lord today. He will never leave you or forsake you. Even in your hardest days, He is there. Trust Him. Look forward to His final removal of evil and suffering. Thank Him for His grace today. Be more aware of His goodness today and of His goodness tomorrow.
3. Finally, let's all commit to perseverance. I think the days will get harder, not easier, as Christians. We must stand firm for our Lord. Repent of sin quickly, and live lives worthy of the calling of our merciful Lord.

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SERMON APPLICATION GUIDE

TAKEAWAYS

Write out your one-sentence takeaways. Consider writing these on a notecard and putting it on your mirror, desk, or car dashboard.

What to remember:

What to put off/put on:

What to share with someone:

NEXT STEPS

Here are some next steps to walk in this truth this week. Don't feel constrained to these but feel free to use them.

- Consider how God would have you share this good news of what Jesus has done and will do with family and friends this Thanksgiving.
- Read slowly through Revelation 4 & 5. Meditate on the greatness of our Creator and Redeemer.
- Study the passages in the "FOR FURTHER STUDY" section this week to see these truths other places in the Bible.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

For those wanting to study some of the key ideas in more detail here are some cross-references and resources.

- **General:** Rev. 5:9–10; 3:5; 22:14; Is. 49:10; 25:8–9; Ps. 23:1–2;
- **The cleansing power of Jesus' blood:** Ps. 51:7; Is. 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:17–19; 1 John 1:7; Rev. 12:10–11; Heb. 9:13–14
- **What awaits "the ones who conquer" through perseverance:** Rev. 2–3
- **Thankfulness:** 1 Thess. 5:16–18; Eph. 5:20; Rom. 1:21; 6:17; 7:24–8:1; Ps. 100; 136

APPLICATION AND DISCUSSION

These questions focus on the sermon text and message. We've highlighted key ones but use however many your group needs.

1. How would you summarize the main idea of 7:9–17?

- 2. What are some of the biggest challenges to your perseverance in the faith? One of the primary purposes of the book of Revelation is to foster perseverance in suffering Christians. How does the picture in Revelation 7 help cultivate perseverance in your own life?**

- 3. Why is having Jesus at the center of your life essential to a thankful life? What else competes with Jesus for the center of your life?**

- 4. How do our weekly worship gatherings foreshadow what's happening in Rev. 7:9–12? How does remembering that truth change the way you approach Sunday mornings?**

- 5. This sermon was like a bridge from Thanksgiving to Advent, helping us look back with thanksgiving and look ahead with longing. When you use this passage to look back, what are some aspects of your salvation for which you're most thankful? When you use this passage to look ahead, what about this picture stirs up longing in your heart for Christ's return?**

- 6. How does the fight of faith we've been talking about in Romans 6–7 connect to the perseverance we see in Revelation 7?**

- 7. The holidays can be a time where we're painfully aware of our suffering. How does Rev. 7:9–17 bring comfort and hope in the midst of your hardships?**

HOW TO PRAY

Pray over the praises and requests of those around you but here are some additional ways to pray into our passage this week.

Confess ways you've not been grateful to God for all He's given you, and have instead grumbled.

Thank God for the blood of the Lamb that washes us clean from all our sins!

Ask God to help you persevere in faith, even amidst trials and suffering.

Ask God to make you truly grateful for his great salvation, and to create in you a hope-filled longing for the day we gather with all the redeemed around the throne of the Lamb.