

A Vision Worth Living For Revelation 7:9-17

INTRODUCTION

I can remember it like it was yesterday when Emma and I were at the hospital to learn the gender of our first born child. Would it be a boy? Would it be a girl? One thing was certain: everything in our lives was about to change. As the ultrasound technician welcomed us into a room and proceeded to move the wand across Emma's stomach, my hands were clammy, my heart was racing, and my legs were jittery. Of course I wanted everything healthwise to be just fine, but mostly I wanted to know if my first child was going to be "Hudson" or "Amy" (Yes, we've had that name picked out since the beginning!)

The tech finally satisfied our anticipation by asking us if we wanted to know the gender. Of course we agreed, and she proceeded to inform us that we were having a baby boy! Now for Emma I knew that she already had visions of the future with her baby girl or boy because she was the one carrying the child; she couldn't help but think ahead in response to what she physically felt *in* her! But until then, I honestly felt separated and unable to cast clear light on all that would be.

But when I learned that I was having a boy, visions of the future came flooding into my mind! I envisioned taking him golfing, hiking, camping, to his first baseball game, on a family vacation, sitting down reading books with him, eating a meal with him, laughing with him, reading the Bible with him, praying with him, and the list goes on! ***Before I was excited about what could be, but now I was driven by a vision of what must be.*** And since that day to today, I've been driven by that vision to be a father who loves his children and wants them all to one day be men and women of consequence to the glory of God!

Now I tell you this story because it shows the impact of a vision. Andy Stanley in his book "Visioneering," says that *"a vision is a clear mental picture of what could be, fueled by the conviction that it should be."* We all

at different points in our life have had a vision of a better future that instills passions in us today. Those of you who are students here often cast visions in your head about what you will do after high school; what you want to study or who you want to be. Those of you who are entrepreneurs have made your living off of making your imagination a realization. And for anyone in here who has ever given time to a significant project - you never would have done so if you didn't have a picture in your head of what the final product would or should be.

You can see that having a vision of a better tomorrow pushes us with passion to produce change today. In fact, those who are often least productive are those who lose sight of their vision. Someone once said, *“If you don't have a vision, you're going to be stuck in what you know. And the only thing you know is what you've already seen.”*

TRANSITION

Well today I want to instill in you a vision of the future that you haven't yet seen. ***But what makes this vision unique is that it's not just what could be, but what will be.*** In our text today in Revelation 7:9, the Apostle John is not contriving his own vision of a better future; rather, he's receiving a vision of the guaranteed future from the One who controls the future! John throughout the book of Revelation is invited to peek behind the curtain to see such unfathomable things that he often struggles to articulate in words!

Yet thankfully here in v.9 he is able to paint a very clear vision of what is destined to take place, a vision that you and I (to some degree) will be a part of (provided we know Jesus in faith).

Try to picture the scene with me: *“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!’”*

If that doesn't make the hair on the back of your neck stand up, I don't know what will! We will break this passage down as we progress here this morning, ***but right now up front I want to say that this vision of global salvation should change the way we live today.***

Visions are meant to move us to action. Dreamers dream about things being different. Visionaries envision themselves *making* a difference. Because we got invited with John to see this picture of the future, we too are now visionaries! ***And those who are visionaries carry a responsibility to see it happen.*** You can have many good visions of things you want to do with your life but your soul only has room for one great, all-encompassing vision that drives your life forward. ***My challenge for you today is to make this vision your passion!***

SETUP

So as we consider this vision of salvation today, I want us to first understand the task it calls us to, then to embrace that calling, and lastly to reap the rewards.

BODY

Let's begin by understanding the task. In v.5-8 of chapter 7, John describes 144,000 sons of Israel, or Jews, that came to faith during the Great Tribulation. There is debate whether this number should be taken literally. ***To me it seems there is a healthy hermeneutical reason to take this number literally.*** We see it appear in several other parts throughout Revelation (ch 14). It also gives us the precise breakdown of the 144,000 as 12,000 from each tribe of Israel. Revelation 14:3 says that these Jews were redeemed during the Tribulation. Many believe there will be mass salvation for Israel during the Tribulation. This would represent Daniel's 70th Week, in which God finishes His good work with Israel. According to Zechariah 12:10 says in the end the Jews will repent and turn to Him whom they pierced. Paul also believes in Romans 11:25-27 that a partial hardening of the Jews will soon come to an end and it will result in a mass conversion. Revelation 14:4 describes the 144,000 as the firstfruits of salvation during the Tribulation, who likely then lead the mission of

evangelization for those left upon the earth. They are able to fulfill this mission because Revelation 7:3 says they are “sealed” or protected for this very purpose. (Whew, are you keeping up?)

But after John *hears* this specific number of 144,000 in 7:4, he then looks and sees a multitude that no one could number. It seems that those present are from every nation, tongue, tribe, and people. It says these people are clothed in white robes, likely signaling their justified state by way of the Lamb. We see this clearly portrayed in v.14 where it says, *“They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”* Isn’t that a beautiful picture?! Since when is a stain removed by washing it in blood? The only way is if that blood protects and covers someone from the wrath of God. This is exactly what the blood of Jesus does for us! *“What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus! What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus! Oh precious is the flow that makes me white as snow! Nothing but the blood of Jesus.”* Only Jesus can make a heart clean, and here He’s washed away their sin stains by way of His blood, making their robes white as snow.

But who comprises this multitude? Is it everyone? Is it you and I? Again, v.14 says that these are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. Given the context of the first half of chapter 7, ***these believers were most likely the fruitful result of the preaching of the 144,000 Jews (among others) during the Tribulation.*** It’s also assumed that those representing this vast multitude were all martyred for their faith. We can conclude this from Rev 6:9-11 - *“⁹ When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. ¹⁰ They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” ¹¹ Then they were each given a white robe (same white robe just a chapter later!) and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been. What’s clear here is that during the Tribulation an uncountable number (likely millions) of people from all*

ethnicities and tongues will come to faith in Christ only to be martyred.

Will you and I be there to witness this? I think it's likely that if the rapture is pretribulational, or if we've already died by natural causes, then we also should be caught up together with the Lord in the air to witness this multitude of martyred believers. ***It will be a sight like none other...and it will remind us of God's global heart for the nations.***

UNDERSTAND THE TASK

His mission from the beginning was to cover the earth with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. He blessed Israel SO THAT they could be a light to the Gentiles. He told Abraham in Gen 17:5 that He would be the father of a multitude of nations. Jesus' Great Commission tells us to go and make disciples of ALL NATIONS, and Acts 1:8 says that we will be His witnesses even to the uttermost parts of the earth. Perhaps most important are Jesus' words in Matthew 24:14 when He says that ***"This Gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole earth as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."***

There is clearly a gap then between the vision presented in this passage and the state of world evangelization today. Based on the global vision of salvation given in v.9, we can conclude that the task of salvation remains to be accomplished among all people. According to the Joshua Project, as of this year, of the 17,400 people groups worldwide, there are still 7,400 that remain unreached. These groups represent over 3 billion people! An unreached people group is defined as less than 2% Christ-followers and less than 5% professing Christians. This is different from an unengaged people group. This would be defined as a group that still has no pioneering missionary efforts. As of today, there are 3,050 unengaged people groups, comprising 278 million people globally.

This is the task at hand, but before we continue, let me clear up something that may be stirring in your minds. Our passage says that the multitude John saw from every nation and tongue was from out of the Tribulation.

Does that mean we don't have a part to play in completing the Great Commission to all peoples? Isn't it saying this is finished during the Tribulation? Well yes, it is finished during the Great Tribulation, but it would be a misapplication to say we don't contribute to that final scene of glory! All John can conclude is that this multitude is uncountable and it looks like it's from every tribe and tongue. He clearly didn't have time to count and confirm that it was indeed every people group! ***Therefore, what we do today progresses God's end goal of world globalization! It definitely plays a part in hastening this coming day of salvation!***

EMBRACE THE CALLING

This leads us from the task at hand into our need to embrace the calling. Since salvation remains to be accomplished among all people, it requires two things: ***First, Salvation requires God's work in God's people.*** If you look in v.9-10, you can envision a scene reminiscent of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. At that time they held palm branches and praised Him for the salvation He would bring, and here the people are holding palm branches and praising Him for the salvation He has accomplished in their lives! V.10 says they cried out with a loud voice, ***"Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"*** Here in this one verse we see the kingly rule of God upon His throne and the sacrificial love of God in the Lamb. ***Isn't it nice to know that when all things come to an end, God is on the throne and the Lamb's blood has brought victory to lost sinners like you and I?***

This is what they are declaring in this passage: Salvation belongs to God. This means He is the One who authored salvation and accomplished salvation. Jesus didn't *just* make a way for salvation; He gave the Holy Spirit to apply salvation to our hearts. This means the work of salvation is God's work through and through! It's never brought about by the will of man. We cannot contrive or accomplish salvation in our own lives, and we certainly can't accomplish it in the lives of others! You are not persuasive enough, smart enough, or a good witness enough to bring someone into the Kingdom. Salvation belongs to God and God alone!

This is not meant to be defeating news but rather encouraging and soul-relieving news. It reveals our need, and our dependence. ***It shows our need to involve God in our evangelizing efforts.*** Perhaps the better way to say it is we must join Him in His work! Either way, however you see it, we must work with God, alongside God, not ahead of Him and not behind Him, in leading others to Him.

How do we involve God? Scripture's primary answer to this is prayer. Prayer is our way to connect with God, to connect ourselves to His resources. These include His wisdom, insight, promptings, encouragement, boldness, and power. There is so much to avail ourselves of in prayer! But what do we often find ourselves praying for? Personal needs, minutiae throughout the day, trivial things that usually reveal the true state of our hearts. Yet the aim of this passage is evangelistic prayer for the sake of the nations! ***What God most wants to be involved in is the thing He cares most about: the lost souls all around us!***

I read a story this week about a man who invited God into His evangelistic efforts by way of prayer. There are so many stories swarming the internet of outrageous and dramatic acts of God in prayer - those are inspiring but often unrelatable. This story is one I think we can relate to. One day while this man was out prayer walking in his neighborhood, he came across a neighbor of his, a woman in her early 40s, that he struck up a conversation with. He felt the Spirit nudge him to ask her if there was anything he could pray for. She spoke of a challenging situation at work. When she was finished, he simply prayed for her. After the prayer, the woman said she felt a strong sense of peace flow through her during that prayer. She thanked him and continued on with her day.

Later that week while he was out on a walk again, he happened to come across this woman again. He asked for an update on things at work and then followed by asking if there was anything else he could be praying for. She mentioned her eight year old daughter she was raising by herself. When she was finished, he again prayed for her. This time after praying first for her daughter, he felt led to continue the prayer. He prayed for

everything he could think of that was God's will according to Scripture. He prayed for current events and God's heart for the nations. After about 20 minutes, he finished the prayer. The woman embraced him with tears in her eyes. She said she again felt such peace and joy while he prayed.

She said that she also wanted to pray like that at home. He said that of course that's possible but as of right now her experience in prayer would be different than his because he has a relationship with Jesus. He proceeded to share the Gospel with her and asked if she wanted to have this same relationship with Jesus. She quickly responded with a "yes!" They finished their time together that day with one more short prayer for her salvation.

This story illustrates the power of prayer when we choose to involve the God of prayer in our evangelism efforts. When we do this, we then must trust Him to work! He is excited to join us! He wants to be involved! And the reality is, He must be involved. As our text says, ***"Salvation belongs to our God."*** Salvation requires God's work in God's people.

It's good to start with God's work because everything in evangelism is dictated by His will and His work. ***But in order for us to accomplish the global task at hand, salvation also requires the suffering of God's people.*** Yes, you heard that right. Reaching others with God's salvation requires our suffering. Yes, of course God could go save all those He wants to right now, but He chooses to use weak vessels, selfish vessels, like you and I. ***And in order for us to embrace a heavenly mission, there has to be a death to our earthly selves.***

In v.14 we see the identity of this multitude dressed in white robes. The elder says they are those coming out of the great tribulation. These are those who were martyred for their faith in Jesus! It's likely that they were the fruitful harvest of the 144,000 during the Tribulation. These too would have been quickly killed by the antichrist if God Himself hadn't sealed them in v.4. This protects them from attack as they continue their evangelistic mission.

All this makes it clear that as we quickly approach the end of time, persecution will increase. Right now in the West, persecution usually comes in more subtle forms: a cold shoulder, a subtle jab in a conversation, a workplace bias, or getting overlooked in a promotion. Persecution may increase to the realm of verbal mocking, insults, and false accusations meant to undermine your character. But you will never get imprisoned and very unlikely to be tortured or killed.

Yet in most parts of the world persecution of that nature is quite common. According to Voice of the Martyrs, 340 million Christians live in countries where they might suffer high levels of persecution or discrimination. Of that number 309 million live in countries where they might suffer very high levels of persecution. In Nigeria alone in 2020, 5,678 Christians were killed. In North Korea, the most dangerous country to be a Christian, there are currently 50,000-70,000 Christians in prison for their faith.

I share all these stats not to merely alarm you, but to awaken you! Our faith is a hated faith by many, and everything in America is moving quickly in that same direction! Jesus' words were sobering in Mark 13:3 when He said, ***“You will be hated by all for my name's sake.”***

But what we learn from suffering is that it's not just a consequence but an opportunity. The perspective begins to change and endurance grows strong when we realize that the name of Christ is not just the cause of our suffering but the purpose of our suffering. As a purpose, we can expect to suffer so that in our suffering we might ***testify*** to the name of Jesus. The legitimacy of the Gospel takes on all new influence when people see what we are willing to lose that we might share Christ.

And I'll tell you, there's no way this Gospel gets to all people unless God's people choose to willingly suffer. All the places that most need the Gospel are also most closed to it. Yet here lies the power of that vision. ***When we begin to see our suffering as a link in the chain that gets us to that multitude before the throne in Revelation 7, new excitement and endurance grows!***

Therefore, we must be obedient. And we must be bold! You may never suffer in massive ways, but you have little opportunities to suffer every day to shine Christ. It may mean you take a prayer walk in your neighborhood instead of watching a show. It may mean you start up a conversation with your neighbor after work when all you want to do is go in and rest. It may mean you take a portion of your day off to serve a friend in need.

What I often hear in such scenarios as a rebuttal is that I need to first take care of myself. If I'm going to be an effective tool for God, I need some me-time first. How would a Christian filled with the Spirit respond to that?

I would respond with the story of Jesus and the apostles in Luke 9 when they return from their first ministry assignment. Jesus knew they were tired, so in v.10 He invited them to withdraw from the crowds to rest and be restored. However, the crowds noticed their departure and followed along after them! It would have been appropriate here for Jesus to politely ask them to leave, but He doesn't. ***Instead He looks on them with compassion, as sheep without a shepherd. Jesus is teaching His disciples here that compassion in the moment supersedes personal provision.*** Why? Because God would give them what they need to fulfill the moment. This is the secret Paul refers to in Philippians 4 - ***I can do all things through Him who strengthens me!***

We can be sure that when God calls us to obedience, He will give us what we need. You do not need to be concerned about caring for yourself because God will care for you! I am certain that God is calling you to make small and large decisions and it's going to feel uncomfortable, challenging, and draining. Yes, you need to have boundaries, but I don't know hardly any Christians who need boundaries when it comes to evangelism!

What we find in the feeding of the 5,000 is that He not only provided them enough energy to serve well, but also abundant food to fill their stomachs! Philippians 4:19 says, ***“And my God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”*** When we seek first His

kingdom and His righteousness in obedience, God will add unto us all we need. This is the supernatural result of being a child of God! ***It's a reason to call Christians to great sacrifice and potential suffering!***

Salvation requires the suffering of God's people, so we must be obedient and we must be bold. This is the calling we are to embrace.

REAP THE REWARDS

And when we embrace this calling, we finally get to reap the rewards. ***In v.15-17 we see that salvation results in the blessing of God's people.***

This great multitude that chose Christ even unto death now forever rests in the eternal presence of the Lamb. Their hunger is gone; their thirst is gone. Now they are led by the Lamb to springs of living water where their souls are fully satisfied. All physical suffering has ended and God wipes away all their tears. As the one worship song says, *"Earth has no sorrow that heaven can't heal."*

This blessing isn't reserved just for those who come out of the Great Tribulation. It's for anyone who loves the Lord. This passage may be referring to the specific Great Tribulation at the end of the age, ***but we all in this life go through various tribulations that test our faith.*** The promise for those who endure through them is eternal life forever in the protection and peace of the Lamb! Don't you desire this? Don't you long for this? Is this a vision worth living for? ***So much of a story that's difficult is undone or entirely forgotten by a good ending.***

Joni Eareckson Tada I'm sure is a name familiar to many of you. If you don't know her story, when she was a teenager who had a terrible diving accident that left her paralyzed from the neck down. She struggled for years to move on but couldn't get past the tragedy of what happened. But things began to change when she began contemplating heaven. She says that she remembered reading texts like Revelation 7 and 19-22 and became captivated by all that was to come. She said that the vision of heaven brought peace and clarity to today. She said specifically, *"It took me out of the pain of the past and gave me a new reason to live for today. I*

was especially struck by the Apostle Paul's words in Philippians 3:13, "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead. I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

Since that turning point in her life, Joni has faithfully preached the Gospel all over the world by way of her radio ministry. She especially ministers to those with significant suffering in this life who need the vision of heaven to make the remaining years on this planet even possible. ***Joni learned to transform the experience of her suffering into a purposeful ministry.***

What suffering are you experiencing today that needs the vision of heaven to bring healing and purpose to it? Brothers and sisters, there is no earthly pain too great to not be swallowed up by the joys of heaven. If you weep today, Christ's promise to you is that you will rejoice tomorrow.

CONCLUSION

We began by talking about the power of a vision. We said that a vision is a clear mental picture of what could be, fueled by the conviction that it should be. Too many of us caught up in the everyday assignments and responsibilities. As good Christians we are driven by productivity and rarely have opportunities to slow down and gain a bearing on our direction.

You could compare this scenario to a swimmer who puts his head down under water and faithfully flaps his arms and legs towards his destination...but the problem is that he never comes back up! As a result he not only loses air but begins moving off course! Maybe today your life feels like this swimmer. You feel out of breath and unmotivated.

My challenge for you today is from David in Psalm 121: "Lift up your eyes!" See again the glory and beauty of your end goal! Catch a fresh vision of where this is all going! We will all someday soon stand before the God on the throne and the Lamb, every sin will be forgiven, every burden lifted, and every longing fulfilled. We will stand side by side with our Hispanic brothers and sisters, our African brothers and sisters, our Asian brothers and sister,

and we will say what it says in Rev 7:12, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

That is a vision worth living for! That is a vision even worth dying for. May it reinvigorate and refuel your spiritual life today.

CLOSING PRAYER