

REVEALED

Part Five: These are They

Revelation 7

Revelation 6:16-17, 17:14, 19:11-13; Ephesians 6:12

1. A Vision of the Church on Earth

- *Revelation 7:3-8*

*** The "Seals"**

- *2 Corinthians 1:22; Ephesians 1:13, 4:30; Romans 4:11; Ezekiel 9:4; Revelation 9:4, 14:1, 22:4, 15:2, 19:20*

*** The "144,000"**

- *Romans 11:11-31*

2. A Vision of the Church in Heaven

- *Revelation 7:9*

*** The Church is Expansive and Inclusive**

- *Revelation 7:9*

*** The Church is Described Less by its Quantity than its Quality**

- *Revelation 7:9*

*** The Church is Described as Unified**

- *Revelation 7:10, 12, 15-17, 4:11, 5:12*

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West Valley Church
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**Revealed:
Uncovering the Mystery of Revelation
Part Five: Revelation 7
These are They¹**

There's been a question hanging in the air since last Sunday. It is a pregnant question, really. Even the asking of it seemed like it was ripe for the answer; as if the answer would explode from the question before it was even finished being asked. It was a question being asked by those who we left last week crawling under rocks. They were afraid of God and the calamity brought about by the first six seals being opened. The results were chaos and destruction and even the persecution and murder of God's people. Those who chose to trust in themselves and their government saw the seals as judgment, not as warnings designed to get them to take stock of themselves and where their loyalty lay (whether in the false security of their nation or the Kingdom of the Lamb). They were being given yet another opportunity to change allegiances, but they chose instead to run and hide from God. In their running away from the very One who could and would save them, they cried out in their hopelessness the question that has been hanging for seven days in this room and in our hearts:

"Hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and *who can withstand it?*" (Revelation 6:16-17, niv)

They asked it as if it was rhetorical, as if the answer was obviously, "no one can!" But there was a second group to whom the answer was just as obvious – that there *are* people who can and will withstand it, and that answer is chapter seven.

Today we are in part five of our fifteen part summer sermon series through Revelation, called "Revealed." Many avoid Revelation because it seems like a book of cryptic messages that elude us and frighten us. It can be confusing, especially with the glut of contradictory and competing self-proclaimed expert authors. But when we read Revelation as it was intended, it provides inspiration and application to our Christian lives today.

So our goal is to help us learn how to read it (and the rest of the Bible, for that matter), to better understand what it says to us today (and what it does NOT say), and to allow the book to speak to us and transform us into Christlikeness, because that is after all, what God's Word is for. That's why we have given you a reading plan

¹ Sources: Carol Rotz, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (2012, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, MO); Richard Eckley, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (2006, Wesleyan Publishing House, Indianapolis); Steve Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views* (2013, Thomas Nelson, Nashville); Scott Daniels, *Marked by the Lamb: Paznaz Study on Revelation* (<http://drtscott.typepad.com/markedbythelamb/>); George Lyons, *Commentary on Revelation 7*; Michael W. O'Neill, *Revelation 7:9-17*

that goes along with the passages we will be looking at on each Sunday, and we've given you three questions to ask yourself and allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you and prepare you for our time together. You can find that on our website. We've also given you several ways to submit questions that you might have. We'll do our best to answer them as we can in our messages, or at the very end in our Q&A Sunday.

We left off last week with chapter six clearly showing the contrast between the arrogant and false power of Rome and the true power of the Kingdom of the Lamb. Four of the seals were the four horsemen, the fifth seal was the martyrs, and the sixth seal was the beginning of the cosmic collapse of the created order. The seals exposed the power of Rome for what it really was – built on the backs of others, exploiting the earth and the weak and powerless. We saw some not-so-subtle similarities between Rome and our own country.

We also saw the martyrs. Speaking of martyrs, let me make this clear: the book of Revelation never attempts to cover up the cost of following Jesus Christ; in fact, it assumes it. The book “presumes a conflict between the faithful and the world. Both belong to fundamentally different spiritual/social realities.”² To be a true follower of Christ will cost you things in this life. It is a struggle that is real – our struggle is not against people whom God loves and Christ died for, but against ideologies and powers. The Apostle Paul said:

“Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Ephesians 6:12, niv)

We *are* to fight against the systems and powers that oppress people, but we love the oppressors. In fact, the reason the martyrs died was because they dared to live a life of love and service to the very ones who killed them. Our fight is AGAINST oppressive powers and systems and spiritual forces. Our fight is always FOR *all* people, no matter what their attitude is toward Christ or us, no matter what their religion or lifestyle is. Christ died to save *all*, not just some. And Revelation assumes that being Christian will require us to suffer and to be servants, willing to love and serve God and people even if it is to the point of death. Revelation assumes that ultimately our faith will lead to death, especially if we are around at the end. Revelation also confidently declares that God, on his throne, will secure saving victory for people through the Lion of the tribe of Judah who is a slaughtered Lamb:

“They will wage war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will triumph over them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.” (Revelation 17:14, niv).

Unlike the nations of our world, the Lamb does not wear the blood of others. The Lamb wears *his own* blood:

“I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True ... He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God.” (Revelation 19:11-13, niv)

² George Lyons, *Commentary on Revelation 7*

Dr. Carol Rotz, one of our denomination's leading scholars on Revelation, states, "Chapter 6 records the dramatic visions of upheaval on earth and in heaven and anticipates the end, but chapter 7 pauses the frenetic action, builds suspense, and assures the church of God's protection."³

Chapter 7 answers the question left hanging from chapter 6: "Who can withstand (the wrath of God)?" The answer is: the church. The church will withstand it! We are going to get to see a glimpse into our own future, West Valley Church. We are also going to see what we are to do as a church until the end. And if you are with us this morning and you are not a Christian, the question from last week is weighing heavy on you: will you be able to withstand the wrath of God, or will you become a part of the Kingdom of the Lamb? You need to decide.

Chapter 7 is divided into two scenes. We'll start with the first scene...

1. A Vision of the Church on Earth

First we see four angels standing ready at the four corners of the earth. Ancient understandings were that the earth was flat and was divided into four quarters, like the four points of the compass, and so the image is likely that the angels had powers over the earth, air, water, and fire. Some scholars connect these four angels with the four horsemen that we talked about last week in chapter six. We don't know that for sure, but we do know for sure that they have been authorized by God to hold back or to let loose the destructive powers. In other words, no part of this world is outside of God's control and command, as he gives it to these angels. The angels are able to keep "the four winds of the earth" from "unraveling the fabric of the world."⁴

Then another angel, who we're told has the seal of God, tells the four angels that they can't turn loose the destruction until after a seal is placed on the foreheads of God's people.

Okay, these next verses (3-8) are going to take some explanations. The angel says that God's people need to have a seal placed on their foreheads, and that there are 144,000 of them. Then we are given a list of the twelve tribes of Israel, times twelve, and times a thousand. There're some images and numbers, and we need to understand both what they are and who they are.

First...

The "Seals"

These are not the same thing as the seals that held the scroll together that the Lamb opened and unleashed the judgments. They *do* share some physical imagery similarities, though. Both communicate the authority of the one doing the "sealing."

³ Carol Rotz, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary

⁴ Richard Eckley, *A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*

First, there is the idea of sealing a letter or contract. Usually a document would be rolled or folded, tied in some way, and then a piece of soft wax or clay was placed on it. The sender would press their signet ring or a stamp onto the wax or clay, and it would harden with that seal on it. If someone wrote a letter, the seal would both authorize whom it was from and keep it from being opened except by the person it was for. So more than a type of adhesive to keep a letter closed, it was a sign of ownership and authority. That is the kind of seal we read about in chapter six.

Slaves were also often “sealed” with a brand or a tattoo, sometimes on their forehead – just like a rancher today does to cows or sheep. So whether the seal was a written salutation or a living slave, a seal marked something or someone as belonging to a person in authority.

Next, we’re not told in this passage how the seals are put on the Christians’ foreheads, but we do have some compelling possibilities that all point to the same truth.

The New Testament refers to Christians being sealed by the act of baptism. This is how seriously God and his Word consider the ritual of baptism – that it is a type of “seal” that ritually and supernaturally marks a person as belonging to Christ. That’s why, at our last baptism service, I kind of got after us if there are people in our church who have been Christians but have not yet been baptized. In a very real way, you have not yet been marked with this seal.

Another seal or mark that the New Testament refers to is the filling of the Holy Spirit. To be sealed with the Spirit of Christ is to be marked as God’s possession. The Bible says, “You also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.” (Ephesians 1:13, niv) (2 Corinthians 1:22; Ephesians 1:13; 4:30; Romans 4:11). Another possibility is that John is making a connection to Ezekiel 9:4 where the foreheads of those who mourned the polluting of the Temple were marked for protection from the coming destruction. In that case, it was the Hebrew letter *Taw*, which looks like an “X.” This is another reason why we have the ritual of marking an “X” on our foreheads with ashes of repentance on Ash Wednesday. It is our way of saying that we belong to God.

John’s vision could’ve been any or all of them, but the point is still the same: it is a mark of ownership that these people belong completely to God. Have you been marked as God’s? Will you?

This would be a good time to mention something else that’s really important. Revelation mentions several times how important the seal is that marks people as his own (9:4; 14:1; 22:4); showing how important it is that we are owned by God. However, Revelation shows that the Devil mimics God’s seal, and uses a mark for those who are faithful to the evil one, by taking “the mark of the beast” (15:2; 19:20). **Listen:** Revelation says *far more* about the “seal of God” than the infamous mark on the foreheads of the devil’s followers. So why is it we are so fascinated by the possibilities of the mark of the beast and always trying to figure out what it is? With all the advances in technology for credit card use, grocery store scanners,

biotech scanners and implants, and even tattoos, we've been told by hucksters and fiction writing profiteers that we need to keep watch for whatever in our culture could be the "mark of the beast." Let me say this as clearly as I can, church: **don't be distracted.** *We should be more concerned and vigilant in making sure that we who say we are Christians are carrying the mark of God's seal on our lives,* then being worried or concerned about what the mark of the beast is. Don't be distracted by preachers and best-selling books; be disciplined in making sure you are marked by God. Quit the fascination with the mark of the beast.

Next is...

The "144,000"

The list we are given to account for this number is 12 squared times a thousand, and is a list of the twelve tribes of Israel. There are some interesting observations about the listing of the twelve tribes, but we just don't have time to go into all of it. By the way, that is true every Sunday. There is far more in these chapters each Sunday than we have time to cover, so part of my study is to decipher it all, then decide what's *most* important that is consistent with what God wants us to hear for the day.

Now, there have been a lot of different attempts at, and debates about, deciphering why there are 144,000 and who they are. Some have said the number is to be taken literally as the remnant of ethnic Israelites, or the literal Christian remnant of ethnic Jews. Others have offered that it is a metaphorical number for the faithful Christians who will be protected during the final tribulation, or Christian martyrs who will be kept safe so they can witness. Some have said that they are a messianic army of martyrs who will fight God's enemies in the last days. Many say it represents the church either as a remnant of the visible church or the whole Christian Community. We can safely say this: literal interpretations of this number have far too many problems than I have time to explain, so that leaves us with interpreting the number as symbolic. There are really two implications for what this number symbolizes that are the most compelling. One is that it is an idealized number of the twelve tribes of Israel times the twelve apostles, multiplied by one thousand. That means it represents the expansion of God's promise to Abraham that he would have numerous spiritual descendants (Genesis 22:17). It goes beyond Israel to those of us who have been "grafted in" through the New Testament twelve apostles, as Paul put it in **Romans 11:11-31**, (12 X 12), expanded by a large symbolic number (1000) to include *all* those who come to faith in Christ (144,000). It is not a literal number but a number that is all encompassing of everyone who is a part of God's family, whether Jew or Gentile.

The other implication about this number is this: the symbolic richness of the number shows how God is still the Good Shepherd who knows each of His sheep by name and has us each numbered, so that even the most seemingly insignificant believer is accounted for and watched over by God. Not one of God's faithful will be lost!

It's also important to note from this passage that **God would protect them through, but not from, these tribulations**. We know this in this passage because the biblical words for "tribulation" (*thlipsis*) and "wrath" (*orge*) are never used interchangeably in the Bible; they are distinct. So the people of God are expected to *go through tribulation*, but they are *excluded from the wrath* of God that is in store for the enemies of God and his church. Should I repeat that?

Now John's narrative takes us to the second scene...

2. A Vision of the Church in *Heaven*

Now we see from a heavenly perspective the 144,000 on earth. We are given a striking contrast between the specific number in the tribal census of the earthly scene just before and the vast multicultural crowd now. Not only does the scene shift, so does the chronology. Earlier we were looking at the sealing of the faithful to withstand tribulation. Here we are seeing the picture of a future, triumphant church, after the events of the first half of the chapter. There are some encouraging and instructive things we learn from this description, starting with the fact that it is a great multitude that no one can count (7:9):

* The Church is *Expansive* and *Inclusive*

The crowd that John sees is so large it can't even be counted. Think about what that meant to John. John had been exiled to the lonely, sparsely populated island of Patmos. He must have been so encouraged to see that he wasn't alone; that there were countless multitudes of Christians that would eventually come from his efforts, even from an isolated island. This encourages us, too. Our Christian culture gets so caught up in numbers. Tomorrow I leave for a meeting with several hundred other pastors from eight states in the Northwest. One thing pastors always ask each other is, "How big is your church?" I'm serious! It's very easy to get caught up in the numbers game, as if the attendance of your church determines your success as a pastor. Pastors aren't the only ones; attenders can become prideful of the numbers in their church. It's easy to do. I don't want to get caught up in that, and I don't want to, so I don't play that game. When they ask me, "How big is your church," I'll say, "We have a *great* church!" They'll say, "Good for you! How big is it?" And I'll say, "We have such *great people*!" "Okay. But how many?" "They are the best! I love our church. It has so many great people in it!" They finally give up. Our focus is not on numbers, it's on being committed believers and on Kingdom impact. But make no mistake: a healthy church grows! We are to love Jesus and to love and serve our neighbors, and then when they ask us, we introduce them to Jesus. And whatever the numbers, we have the assurance that we are contributing to an expansive church that includes everyone who will respond to the Good News of God's love and salvation.

Then John says the innumerable crowd is made up of people from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue (7:9)...

*** The Church is Described Less by its Quantity than its Quality**

Even though there are too many to count, we are given great detail about who they are. The succession of the words in the original Greek language is a beautiful way of wrapping our arms around the entire world: every nation, tribe, people, and tongue.

Globalization is a reality today more than ever before, whether we like it or not. We've been hearing a term used a lot these days to describe our world: that it's a "global village." Well that could easily be a modern day translation of this description in John's vision. God's Church is global, not national. That's why our work in Victoria, Guyana, is so important to God and to our Kingdom work. That's also why our growing Spanish speaking church family is so treasured to us and so important. I've been praying since even before our first official day here six and a half years ago that we would become a church that is *missional*, not *missionary*. What I mean by that is that we would see our responsibility to reach out in love and service locally, regionally, and globally, not just seeing missions as only global. That means that we will serve our community just like a missionary in another culture would serve their community. That means our church must also reflect the cultural make-up of our community. The West Valley community is roughly 35% of Mexican descent. And yet for decades our church has been 99% white. And after years of prayer and years of service to our neighborhood through Upward Soccer and our partnership with Wide Hollow Elementary, our church is beginning to look more like the blended color of our community. I have to say to our Spanish speaking church family: thank you! How I thank God for you. You are courageous enough to come be a part of our church family, even though we are mostly English speaking vanilla ice cream people. I can only imagine how difficult it can be to sit in a church and worship and listen to preaching that is not your primary language. But you are doing it! Thank you! And let me tell you, we NEED you! We are not the church without you! We *can't* be West Valley Church without you!

And for the rest of us: thank you for welcoming them into the family of worship. Thank you for embracing them with hospitality. Thank you for not allowing differences to get in the way. Is it awkward? Sometimes. But keep getting over the awkward and thank them for being here. Are there some language challenges? Yes. But *they* are doing the hard work of overcoming that; shouldn't we do the same for them? I'm hoping that one day soon we will have an SSL class – Spanish as a Second Language. It's a beautiful language and I desperately need to learn it. Some people might wonder why we don't just have a Spanish-speaking church that meets somewhere else or at a different time. My answer is: Revelation 7:9. If you can show me where in Revelation 7:9 it says we should worship in our own separate groups, I'll consider it. But from what I see, we are a church that worships together, in unity, the same language of the Spirit, from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue.

And that's the next description of the heavenly church...

* The Church is Described as *Unified*

Now I think we all know we need to be unified, but this passage describes it specifically: we are unified by what we go through together (we *will* all face tribulation), we are unified by the white robes we are given by God (our forgiveness and holiness. They are given to us from God through Christ's death and resurrection, and that we live it out through holy love of others), and we are unified by our worship (we are all given palm branches to wave).

We are unified in our worship in the Throne room of God. The Throne room is not some kind of "situation room" for war strategizing. It is not a "social services" office that tries to assist the persecuted church. There is not an attitude of anger, or anxiety, or impatience. The Throne room has one activity only: *worship*. It is calm, it is at peace, and it is powerful. It is a different picture than the turmoil, stress, and persecution that is happening on earth.

There is an amazing scene here: we, the church, gathered around God's throne, sing in a loud voice:

"Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."
(Revelation 7:10, niv)

We sing about salvation because we are the only ones gathered in the Throne room who have experienced it. We are the only ones for whom Christ died. He did not die for the angels or the four living creatures. Only *we* can genuinely worship God from the experience of salvation!

Then, all the elders and the four living creatures that were described earlier fall down on their faces and worship both in agreement with our worship and in response to our worship:

"Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" (Revelation 7:12, niv)

How many attributes are offered to God in worship? Seven. There's that seven again.

I want to share with you a story that I haven't shared before. Not long ago, we were worshipping together on a Sunday morning, and as we were singing, I thought I heard something else. I quit singing and began to listen to your voices. But I still heard something *else*. It is difficult to describe. When I tried to listen for it, it disappeared. But when I quit listening for it and just listened to your voices offering praise to God, I could hear it. It took me awhile to figure out what it was. I am confident that what I was hearing was heaven singing responsively along with you. I'm sure of it. Now, you can doubt me if you want; I can't prove it. I don't care if you think I'm making this up. I know what I heard. And whether I heard it or not, it doesn't matter – we just keep worshipping God through Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. But I'm telling you I heard what this chapter describes. And I believe it happens *every* time we gather to wholeheartedly worship God, whether we ever hear it again this side of heaven or not.

Then, finally, we get an explanation of who the crowd is. It comes as a sort of rhetorical question from one of the elders to John: "Who do you think these people are?" and John says, "You ought to know! You tell me!" And he says: "These are they. These are they who have come through the Great Tribulation: the Tribulation to end all Tribulations that the church has gone through forever. Their robes have been washed white by the red blood of the Lamb." Then, the elder recites who they are and what they now experience. And he does it as a poem; a sort of angelic spoken word. Listen to it:

"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.
'Never again will they hunger;
never again will they thirst.
The sun will not beat down on them,'
nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb at the center of the throne
will be their shepherd;
'he will lead them to springs of living water.'
'And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'" (Revelation 7:15-17, niv)

This is our future, through all the trials and struggles and tribulations we have and will ever face, *this is our future*, from the vast, innumerable crowd around the throne in worship to the most intimate relationship in worship. "Even though the multitude is so great that it cannot be numbered, still, in their worship, the Lamb Himself has become their Shepherd, caring for them, leading them in a life that is as fresh as a swift moving stream, even stooping down to personally wipe away every individual's tears. Of course, the center of all this is God Himself. Unlike the one-directional audience structured worship settings of our churches, this church is gathered completely encircling the throne. The Throne, or rather the One upon it, is the central focal point of this entire heavenly scene.

What a different image than the one we see in today's churches. While we focus on tempo, time schedules, and types of music, the focus of this vision is God. While we wonder about thermostats and sound levels and how people are feeling, God Himself sets the atmosphere that surrounds His people. What might happen if we were to focus more on God than on song styles? Could our 'elders' teach the person next to them, (at least by example), even as the multitude sing and shout (yes, shout) their praises? Could the very lives of the multicultural worshipers become an illustration of the amazing salvation victory of the Lamb?"⁵

We must continue to be the church on earth, but never lose sight of who we are as the church in heaven. We must both reflect that church in heaven and in our community, reaching as many as we possibly can to gather with us one day around the throne.

⁵ Michael O'Neill, *Revelation 7:9-17, assignment 3.1*

In conclusion, I want to share a song with you that was written over 40 years ago. It's not in a style that those of us who are younger would like, but just focus on the worship. It summarizes well what we've seen in this chapter. These are they.

Play video.

Pray