

February 13, 2000
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FOLLOWING CHRIST IN A FRIGHTENING WORLD:
A HEAVENLY HUSH
Revelation 7:9--8:5

Let's remind ourselves of the context. Chapter six tells of the unsealing of six of the seven seals on the scroll of human destiny. All hell is breaking loose as the world is besieged by almost unrestrained tyranny, warfare, famine, death, religious persecution and natural disaster. I say ALMOST unrestrained. Because in chapter seven comes what? Restraint. Sabbath. Rest. There is an interlude when God pauses for a moment. Why? Because He is about to respond to this world in total rebellion. The seals represent the world in its disobedience to God. What is going to follow, both the seven trumpets and the seven bowls, represents God's RESPONSE to that world in rebellion. God's wrath ... his judgment ... has been restrained up until now. But we are about to see God let his wrath loose upon this rebellious world. It will not be pretty. In fact, it will be quiet ugly.

But before God executes his judgment on the world, he places a seal on the forehead of his followers. The text calls them 144,000 but as I said last week ---and I know some of you disagree with me because you made it clear following the message ---I believe the 144,000 mentioned here represents the Church. The new and true Israel that Paul talks about in Romans 9-11. God is going to execute judgment but first he must seal his own children...identify them and protect them ...from the wrath to come. Now...that the sealing is done...let's see what is going to happen. (Read)

In the opening of this morning's text, we see a multitude even larger than the 144,000. It is described as being so large that no one can even count them. They are comprised of people from every nation, tribe and tongue. All of them are standing before the throne of God and before the Lamb. They are wearing white robes, which probably indicates that they have died and they are waving palm branches, which represent victory.

Let me tell you what I believe is happening here. I think this is a "before and after" picture. The image of the 144,000 represents a glimpse of the Church before a period near the end of human history which Revelation calls the Great Tribulation. That Great Tribulation will be carried out by an evil world dictator that will make Adolf Hitler look like a kindergarten teacher. We will meet this horrible man later in chapter 13. The Revelation calls him Antichrist.

The 144,000 are sealed, I believe, to protect them for the time of great tribulation and persecution that will come when God and Antichrist do battle. Those who are followers of Jesus will avoid the eternal, God-separating consequences of the Great Tribulation. But they will go through the Great Tribulation.

I know that this will come as a shock and a disappointment to many of you. I know that many Christians teach that the Church will be raptured ...taken up in the twinkling of an eye ...before the Great Tribulation. But I don't believe this is what scripture teaches. I don't believe it is what Jesus taught. Listen to some of his words on the subject out of Matthew 24 (you might want to read this in its entirety later.)

So when you see standing in the holy place the 'abomination that causes desolation,' (the Antichrist)...let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains...For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now--and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.

Do you realize what Jesus is saying? He doesn't say that the Church...the elect as he calls it in this text...will avoid persecution. He says that they will go through the greatest persecution the world will ever see. But he does say that, for the sake of the elect, God will cut short the time of persecution.

The Church will endure the Great Tribulation. If this is not so, why should the servants of God require a seal to protect them from God's coming wrath against the world? And notice verses 13-14 when one of the angels explains to John what he is looking at: "These in white robes---who are they, and where did they come from?" John answers: "Sir, you know." (i.e., I have no idea, but I know you do. So just tell me.) And the angel responds:

"These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

This does not mesh well with much of the teaching in American Christianity. The attitude often seems to be, "Jesus may have spoken of the persecution of his followers... and millions of people down through the ages may have died a martyr's death for their faith... and even to this very moment, Christians may be dying in the Sudan and China and many other places around the world ...but surely God will deliver the **American** Christian Church from suffering and persecution." I believe there is an underlying arrogance to this theology, an arrogance that ignores Jesus' teaching about the costly nature of discipleship and an arrogance that ignores the pain and suffering that Christians have historically faced for the sake of the gospel.

I am glad we are not currently experiencing persecution. I pray that we won't. But I do not believe it is faithful to the scriptures to pretend that when times of suffering come, whether the Great Tribulation or not, that, somehow, we will be exempt from it. For if that is the expectation of the Christian Church, and suddenly we find our selves confronted by persecution, Great or otherwise, what will happen to the faith of so many who bought into a gospel that would preserve them from all tribulation?

The Great Tribulation does not occur in Revelation until chapter 13 when the Antichrist appears. Clearly, the vision in chapter 7 anticipates what is to come. Don't get frustrated. I know you would prefer to have the story unfold A, B, C, D and so on. But remember, this is Apocalyptic. It is surreal. It jumps all over the place. Different images. Different times. Different characters.

So ... when you see the 144,000, you are seeing the Church being sealed ...i.e., identified as God's own ..so that no matter what the Antichrist might do to them, including killing them, they cannot be separated from God's eternal love. And when you look at verse 9, John has fast-forwarded the tape. He has jumped ahead, beyond the tribulation, to a glimpse of what it will be like when everyone who has been sealed by God ...everyone who belonged to Jesus ...has died and now stands before God in the security of his eternal presence.

If you are confused or disagree with me on this, don't worry. We will return to the subject many times before we are done. But for the time being, we have this great multitude standing before the throne of God. However they got there, through death or through the rapture, clearly they stand safely in the presence of God and of the Lamb-like Lion who redeemed them with his blood.

What is their natural response? They break out in praise. It doesn't say that they sing these words, but in this book that is filled with songs of praise, it is hard to imagine that they are not singing them. Listen:

*Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.*

*Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power
and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!*

I wonder if you can imagine the glory of this scene. Countless multitudes ...millions ...billions, perhaps ...all dressed in gleaming white robes...all who have the seal of God upon their forehead ...all who have bowed their hearts to the Lamb who sits on the throne...cry out their words of praise and thanksgiving to the God who has saved them. And listen as the angels respond in glorious words of praise. It is a scene of absolute jubilation. It is a glimpse ahead to a time when all that is evil and horrible about this world will be behind and forgotten in the presence of the glorious and gracious and redemptive Lamb of God. Heaven is in bedlam. Heaven is in heavenly uproar.

And then it all stops. Chapter 8:1: "When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour." Suddenly, the vision stops. Suddenly, the glorious praise ceases.

On our last trip to the Holy Land last November, I did something I have never done in my five trips there. I stayed in a hotel inside the walls of the Old City. I will never do any other again. Even though the hotel was not nearly as opulent as some in which I have stayed, we had the benefit of being able to get up early in the morning ---with jet lag, it is EASY to get up early in the morning ---take a quick shower and walk right out into the streets of Old Jerusalem, losing ourselves in the ancient twists and turns of that mysterious city.

Rick Murray is the pastor of First Pres., Yakima and my dear friend. We have been collaborating on this series from Revelation. Rick was my roomie in Israel and we shared two memorable worship experiences on two subsequent mornings while we were staying in the Gloria Hotel in Jerusalem.

One morning, before sunrise, we made our way to the Western Wall, also known as the Wailing Wall. When we got there we discovered hundreds and hundreds, perhaps thousands of Jewish men gathered in worship. All of them wore their *teffilim*, also known as phylacteries. This is a leather box that contains scripture passages. The box is tied to the forehead by long leather thongs that they then wrapped around the arm. They also wore prayer shawls.

In order to be in that area, Rick and I had to cover our heads. We did so with the little paper skull caps--yarmulkes-- which they provided at the entrance to the wall. We moved to the back and sat down on a bench. Just taking it all in. Hundreds of Jews in their regalia bobbed up and down as they offered prayers to God. Some of them read from a Torah that was unrolled on a standing table before them. Some prayed silently. But most prayed out loud. Some prayed VERY out loud... shouting their prayers so that everyone in that vast courtyard could hear them.

Rick and I decided to share in prayer. We put our heads close together so that we could hear each other, closed our eyes and began to pray. Loudly. Otherwise we could not have heard each other over the din of the other worshippers.

Suddenly, I was aware of the fact that I was the only one in that entire area that was praying out loud... VERY out loud. Everything was dead quiet. Complete silence. **"...AND LORD, THANK YOU FOR THE CHANCE TO BE IN THIS HOLY PLACE.....!"** For some reason, at some signal of which we were unaware and never discovered, everyone had gone quiet....all of the hundreds and hundreds that were packed into that courtyard. From the silent pray-er to the screamer in the corner, every man was absolutely silent. We think it was the moment the sun rose. But we still don't know how everyone knew to be still at precisely the same moment. I'm not sure if anyone looked over to see who the stupid American was that was screaming out his prayers

when everyone else was quiet. I was keeping my head down so that I didn't have to look at anyone. But it was an absolutely amazing transformation. In one moment, the place was in religious bedlam. In the next, everything was absolutely, positively still.

I have to imagine that is something like what is taking place for John. One minute the heavens are awash with the praises of God's creation. Suddenly, the Lamb opens the last of the seven seals and everything goes dead quiet. Absolutely still.

Can you imagine the contrast? This is heaven. It is never still in heaven. Remember chapter 4? God appointed four creatures and twenty-four elders to sit around his throne and eternally sing his praises. The heavens are never quiet. Yet suddenly, all goes still. The heavens ARE quiet. For a half an hour. That's a long time of silence, isn't it? In a room full of people ...in an arena full of people, can you imagine everyone sitting absolutely quiet for thirty minutes? But this is heaven, filled with creatures that exist to sing praises. Yet it goes quiet...for thirty long minutes.

Why? Why does God cause everything to go quiet? Why does he still his worshippers? Any guesses? To hear...the prayers...of the saints. After the Sabbath of chapter 7, we are back to the calamity of the seals. We turn our eyes back to earth where all hell is breaking loose. We've had a glimpse of the glorious future; we have hope that all will turn out well. But now we return to what must first occur. There are events that must first play themselves out. There is an Antichrist that must arise. There are martyrs who will suffer. There is a church that is crying out to the Lord not to be forgotten; not to be abandoned; not to be ignored.

And in this wonderful moment, God hushes the hubbub of heaven for one purpose. He wants to hear the prayers of his people. He wants to hear the prayers of his beloved, those who bear his seal upon their foreheads. And the heavenly household is so noisy that God has to do what every earthly father has had to do at one time or another when he was talking on the phone in the living room. "Will you please be quiet? I am trying to hear what this person is saying."

I told you that Rick had I had two memorable worship experiences in Jerusalem. Let me share the other one. On another early morning we made our way through the quiet streets of Jerusalem toward the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Traditionally, this is the site of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. It is one of the most revered sites in all of Christendom. And imagine...we were walking there in the early morning hours to have our devotions! When we arrived, we discovered a Catholic mass underway. It was in English and attended primarily by a group of Americans. Though we were not Catholic, we stood to the side and joined in the worship of our risen Lord.

We were standing right outside the tomb of Jesus which sits beneath a huge dome that rises up many stories above your head. Shafts of sunlight shone through windows high above us. The pillars, walls and floors are, of course, ancient. The first church was built on that site back in the 4th century.

The Roman liturgy was only slightly familiar to me. We had trouble following our way through the little books we were holding. But I will never forget one moment in the service. Just before they were to distribute the sacrament, two young altar boys walked forward and began to swing censers back and forth, in several directions. For those of you who have never seen them, censers are like ornate silver lanterns on the ends of chains. Inside, incense burns. When they are swung and the air rushes through the holes in the lanterns, the heat intensifies and more smoke is produced.

I had seen censers used before. But I had never seen something like this. I watched as the curls of pungent smoke billowed out of the censers and wafted their way upwards. Through the shafts of sunlight. Over the heads of the worshippers. Above the chapel that housed the tomb of the risen Jesus. And dissipated into the dome that rose so far above our heads.

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre had never meant much to me. I found it too ornate ...too gaudy, frankly, ...to be meaningful. But in this moment, I gained a new appreciation for it. And because I knew that I would be preaching on this passage, I knew I had an illustration.

The prayers of the saints are described in this text as being mixed with the smoke of incense. They are offered up and they begin to climb towards heaven. As they rise they become wispy. Dissipated. Barely visible. Shortly, they are lost in the light and loftiness of the heavens.

But in this glorious text this morning, we have an image of God as a prayer-catcher. He hushes the hubbub of the heavens. He leans forward to listen. He reaches out and snatches this prayer and that one. Every single one is precious to him. None will be lost. Though they are as the air to the rest of us, to God they are precious enough that he commands heavenly silence so that he can be certain not to miss a single one.

I am struck by this image. Recently I had to confess to God that my own prayers have been more stale and infrequent than I want them to be. I had to confess that sometimes I wondered if my prayers really made any difference. With all the people in the world, with all the pray-ers in the world, how can God possibly hear me? How can he possibly have the time to listen and respond to me, one person, one insignificant person.

God cares so much for the prayers of his saints that he hushes the heavenly hubbub so that he won't miss a word, not a syllable, not a breath. If you aren't praying, start. If you are praying but wonder whether it makes a difference, whether it really matters to God or not, stop wondering. It does and it does. What a glorious God, to hush the heavens so that he might hear from his earthly children!

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
HEAVENLY HUSH
Revelation 7:9-8:5

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- *Read from the beginning of chapter 7. Notice that 7 represents an interlude, a "Sabbath" as Pastor Mark calls it. The interlude contains two similar episodes. What are they? How are they similar? How are they different?*
- *White robes have recurred through this book. What do you think they represent? When you read verse 14, does that help explain what is occurring?*
- *There are various opinions on whether the church will go through what John describes as the "Great Tribulation." Some believe that the Church will be "raptured" before that time, i.e., mysteriously taken up into heaven. How does this text address the issue? Does the rest of Revelation suggest that the Church will also face persecution or not? Look at 6.11, 7.1-4. What did Jesus teach regarding persecution? See Matthew 24:4-25.*
- *The text describes the prayers of God's people as the smoke of incense. What does that mean to you? How much "smoke" have you been sending up lately? How hard is God having to strain to hear what you have to say to him? In what way are you encouraged in your prayer life by this passage? Pray together.*