

April 29, 2007
Easter 4

"Look at the Home Your Shepherd Has Prepared for You"

REVELATION 7:9-17

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." ¹¹ All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" ¹³ Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes-- who are they, and where did they come from?" ¹⁴ I answered, "Sir, you know." And he said, "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. ¹⁵ 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 spread his tent over them. ¹⁶ Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. ¹⁷ 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."

How many fingers am I holding up with my hand? (3) If you see three fingers you are correct. Yet if you stretch out your arm, and look through your fingers to an object off in the distance, you might actually see four fingers instead of three. You can try this when you get home today. Focusing on an object at a distance changes your perspective on what you see in front of you. Good advice for learning how to drive more defensively, even better advice for how to cope in this world that is filled with tribulation for the Christian.

The words just read to you from the Revelation direct our attention to what is coming in the future in the place Jesus has prepared for us. As you focus your faith eyes on this future glory the problems of this present life seem small by comparison. That is what Romans 8 tells us when it says, "The sufferings of this present life are not worth comparing to the glory that will be ours." 2 Corinthians 4 says: "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

Psalms 23 says the Lord is our loving Shepherd who will make us lie down in green pastures and rest beside cool waters. The most beautiful places or zones or times in your life happen when Jesus uses his Word to lead you to see how your future glory is far superior to this current life and its attendant problems. Are you ready this morning to follow your Shepherd into a mountain valley so beautiful it will take your breath away and bring tears to your eyes?

Look at the people

Before we look at the actual place the Lord has prepared for us, we want to look at the people who will live with us in that place. "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb." It was a large crowd, a great multitude, so large you could not even count them. At times it seems that the number of believers is so small. Even Jesus our Lord told us, "Many are called but few are chosen." He talked about a narrow path that leads to eternal life that few want to follow. But in the end, when all those who believe in Jesus are raised to life, the number will be large. The Lord told Abraham he would have descendants, people who believed as he believed, more countless than the grains of sand.

Look at the people more closely. You see a large number from every nation, tribe, people and language. Jesus told us to preach the gospel to every creature, and make disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching. The Lord wants all to be saved and come to repentance, regardless of their race, language and culture. As we sing in song, "Yellow, black and white, all our precious in his sight." We long for a congregation, here in this place made of many kinds of different people. Oh that the Lord would hasten that day.

Look more closely at the people gathered around the throne of the Lamb. "They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands." They wore robes washed by the blood of the Lamb. I cannot wash myself and make myself clean. I am born into this world covered with the ugliness of sin like this dirty rag. I keep adding more and more dirt to myself every day. There is no power in me or in you that can take out even one small stain. That is why the blood of Jesus Christ God's Son is so important. It purifies or cleanses us from all sin. The palm branches were symbols of victory. Revelation 12 says that we overcome the accusations of Satan by the blood the Lamb and the Word of testimony, the truths in God's Holy Word.

We see the crowd. Now listen to them sing. "And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.'" We even hear the angels and elders and four living creatures singing their song, "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God forever and ever. Amen!" Praise God. Give him thanks. Shout "Amen!" and "Hallelujah." My salvation and yours belongs to God. He owns it. He controls it. My hands and my heart and my mind had nothing to do with it. That's the theme song of our lives.

Imagine for a moment that a very talented artist as great as Michelangelo would volunteer to do a fresco or a painting on the ceiling of our church, free of charge. I know that some of you are good at artwork, but even the best of us would not even begin to think of volunteering to do part of the painting, because we know we would mess it up. God took our salvation into his hands, provided the blood of Christ to cleanse us, and the Holy Spirit to work faith to believe, so that it would not be messed up. It would be perfect. Salvation belongs to God!! That's the song we will be singing with all the people gathered around the throne of the Lamb forever and ever.

Mark Twain sarcastically asserted that in heaven we will suffer by singing one hymn, over and over again, for twelve hours every day. Mark Twain did not know how beautiful it is to have our salvation belong completely to God, and what a joy it will be to sing this song. Did you ever hear a song that made you cry because it was so beautiful? Heaven will offer

an eternity to sing a song about God's love for us that we will never grow tired of singing or hearing.

These people have something else in common. In answer to the question, "Who are the people in white robes?" the answer comes back, "These are they who have come out of great tribulation, they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood the Lamb." When you become a Christian and believe salvation belongs to God and is not centered in anything you do, you begin to suffer tribulation. The word for tribulation has the thought of being painfully squeezed and put into a very tight place. If I take this sharp pin and push it into my finger I will feel pain. If you take the same pin and put it into a dead body it will feel no pain. People who are spiritually alive feel pain when they do something wrong against God. They ache inside for people they love to know about Jesus. They don't sleep at night because they worry about people who might lose their blessings they have in Christ to sin and unbelief. These are experiences you share with Christians of every age. Some day you will be around the throne of the Lamb with people who have gone through what you have in this life as you carry your cross for Christ.

And what more can we say about these people? "They are before God's throne and serve him day and night in his temple." Can you imagine what it will be like to be around people who serve God day and night with a love that is perfect and pure? Some of the best moments of your life on this earth occur when people show you love and kindness. What if you could just raise the level of love here in Santa Maria in homes, and schools and community 25%? People would come from all over the world just to experience the love that was here among us. How many people do you know who are really hurting in their lives, really starved for love and affection? In the place Jesus prepares for us, the perfect service to God will result in perfect love for people. As we sing in one of our hymns at Christmas, "Oh that we were there. Oh that we were there."

Look at the place

We have seen the people that will be with us around the throne of the Lamb. Now let's look at the place that Jesus has prepared for us as it is described here by John. When we are raised to life again on the last day, the Lord our God will spread his tent over us. He will give us a home, a place to live, that is secure and safe and filled with his love. The 23rd Psalm says, "We will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Remember how happy the lost son was to come home and feel welcomed and loved. If you feel joy and happiness in the love the Lord your Shepherd has for you now in this life, just imagine what it will be like to be in the house of the Lord forever, to have him spread his tent over us forever and ever.

In the house of the Lord there will not be the evil effects of sin that we experience in this life. There will be no hunger. I heard this past week that over 2 billion people in this world are living on \$2.50 per day. There will be no thirst such as some Christians are experiencing in Darfur as they are driven from their homes by Arab marauders and forced to search for water and food. There will be no 130 degree days in the blistering desert sun. The climate the Lord has for us, the food he has waiting for us, the fresh water to drink, all the creature comforts will even exceed the perfect life Adam and Eve had in the Garden of Eden. We love the simple words of Jesus. "I have gone to prepare a place for you." He also described our eternal home as "a kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

Listen to how at the end of the Tales of Narnia, C.S. Lewis described this whole new world waiting for us. "The things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. ... But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page; now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read; which goes on forever, in which ever chapter is better than the one before."

We are looking forward to a place where that the Lamb of God who died for us, rose again and reigns victorious will be our Shepherd and lead us to springs of living water. See the Shepherd lead his sheep up into the mountain heights. He knows the valleys so beautiful they will bring tears to your eyes. He knows where the grass is lush and green, there is cool shade, and there is water flowing fresh and cold from mountain springs. He will take us to places where he will wipe away every tear from eyes. As we sing in the beautiful spiritual hymn, "No more crying there, we are going to see the Lord."

This past week we heard about some school children from Compton who spent a few days in the Santa Ynez Valley to get closer to nature. They camped out and spent one night looking up at the stars. Some had never seen the stars before in their lives. What a treat that was for them. This morning the Lord has also helped us see beyond this present life to a whole new world that is waiting for us with new people and a new place. When you see with eyes of faith the glory the Shepherd has waiting for you, the dirt and the dust and the difficulty of this present life is small compared to what comes in the future. Even so Lord Jesus, come quickly. Come and take us home. Amen.