

Living **NOW** in view of what's to **COME**

Revelation 7:9-17

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Have you ever noticed that life isn't perfect? Sometimes things are so bad that we lose all hope. As one person put it, "There was a time in life when I had lost all hope. I endured failure on many fronts in a short period, causing an immense amount of pain. I had failed in marriage, business, and in life in general. I thought it signaled the beginning of the end. And I just didn't feel like going on."

Ever feel hopeless? It happens all the time, in big ways and small. In today's world, we've been sold a bill of goods. We're being told, marketed to, that life ought to be perfect. A perfect childhood. A perfect home. A perfect family. The perfect job. The perfect spouse. Perfect children. The perfect body, free of aches and pains. Perfect health. Perfect relationships. Perfect weather. Perfect happiness. Heaven on earth!

Good luck, it ain't gonna happen. Not in *this* world. Not in *this* lifetime. Not on *this* side of eternity. If you're hoping everything will be perfect in your life, you're setting yourself up for perfect disappointment. And when all your hopes are dashed, where will you be? Where will that leave you? What hope will you have?

Hope. We can't live very long without it. Why do you work hard in school? Why do you practice in sports? Why do you ask someone out on a date? Why do you get married? Why do you go to work? Why do you exercise? Without hope, where would you be? Without hope, what would be your motivation for all these things? Without hope, how could you live? How could you go on?

The book of Revelation is written to people in desperate need of hope. Like us, they were living in an imperfect world. And especially, as followers of Jesus, they were living in a world where they were hated and mistreated. Losing their homes and earthly possessions. Being fired from their places of employment. Being discriminated against. Derided and called names. Pressured to renounce their faith. Becoming outcasts in their communities. Tortured, mistreated, killed.

How could they go on? What did they have to look forward to? Why get up in the morning? Why go to work? Why keep on going? Have you ever asked similar questions yourself? We all have, or we will one day. The Apostle John is given a vision. A picture of what was yet to come. A reason to go on. A reason to get up in the morning. In a hopelessly imperfect world, *hope* of better things to come.

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 before the Lamb. ... 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. ... 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. If you're a follower of Jesus, that's what's waiting for you. That's what you have to look forward to!

John heard a number: 144,000. And he heard the roll call: 12,000 from every tribe of Israel. 12 x 12 x 1000 in glorious *perfection!* An Israel like there never was before and never will be on this earth. God's Israel, His chosen people, His holy nation, His royal priesthood.

Having heard the perfect number, John then looks, and he sees a great multitude no one could count in all their diversity - from every nation, every tribe, every people, every language. Their Babel divisions are finally ended. They are finally one people under one God. They wear white robes, the sign of their purity. "As many of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ." (Gal 3) They are covered with Jesus and His perfect robe of righteousness. Behold, a vast multitude arrayed in white. Perfect!

They're waving palm branches, the way the Israelites did every year at the feast of Tabernacles, when they marched around the temple grounds waving palm branches to celebrate God's victory, and their homecoming. They're worshipping the slain Lamb, who lives. People ask, "What is heaven going to be like? What will we be doing for all eternity? The answer from Revelation is this: Worship. The way it was meant to be in the beginning, before sin turned us inward, to worship ourselves. You might say that church is kind of preview, a *foretaste* of the feast to come.

John heard their liturgy. They praise Christ, and His Father, for saving them: "*Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.*" There's salvation in no other than this Jesus whom the Father sent to die and rise. He alone is the Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep, for you and me.

The hosts of heaven all agree. They fall down on their faces and add a thunderous "Amen!" together with a seven-fold doxology: "Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God for ever and ever. Amen" This is most certainly true.

The big question, the one pressing on John, is: "Who is this congregation, this crowd of white-robed worshippers, and where do they come from?" They are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. (William Cwirla)

They are Abel, murdered by his brother. Joseph, sold into slavery. Isaiah, who was sawed in half. Paul, who was stoned, beaten, ship-wrecked, and then beheaded. The early Christians who were burned at the stake or thrown to the beasts as entertainment. Christians today who are killed today simply because they won't deny Jesus and confess Mohammed. And you could fill in that list a hundred-fold, with people who lived long ago and people today. In this world and life, they looked anything but successful, anything but blessed. Some might even say they are cursed. (James Douthwaite)

John sees the entire company of believers as it was never seen on earth. He's seeing the triumphant side of the church. In the here and now, we see only the militant. On earth the church looks weak, the church looks divided, the church looks out of touch. On earth, the church's glory is *hidden*; hidden behind a cross. On earth, the church's victory is a matter of faith. On earth, the church's only hope, is a crucified, risen, and reigning Lamb. But now, this white robed bunch, who suffered so much, even the loss of their own lives, are face to face with the only thing that matters. In the end, the only hope there is ... the Lamb at the center of the throne.

We learn the secret of their purity. Their robes are washed in the Lamb's blood. The blood of Jesus Christ, cleanses us from all our sin – all our immorality, all our greed, all our pride, all our lust, all our envy, all our murder, all our gossip, all our theft, all our hatred, all our idolatry. All which comes out of our hearts. Nothing perfect there.

Only the shed blood of Jesus can purify us from that which is within. And when we stand before the throne, we stand *not* on the basis of what we've done, but on the basis of what the Lamb has done - His perfect life, His perfect death. His resurrection to life. All for us.

The apostle John knew his people were going to suffer for the faith. He knew that many would die. He knew that those seven congregations under his oversight, didn't stand a chance against the forces that would be unleashed against them. But he lived in the confidence that the Lord was with them, always. And whether they lived, or died, they did so in the confidence that they would dwell in the Lord's house forever! (Cwirla)

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Jesus is saying the same thing in Matthew 5. *And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. ... "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ... Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven* Living now in view of what's yet to come.

As soon as the final out was called, celebrations erupted across the city of Houston, as fans couldn't contain their excitement for the team's first world series championship, especially after what they'd gone through with the devastation in the aftermath of hurricane Harvey. A great multitude, all wearing Astros orange, all gathered together on a beautiful day, everybody happy, everybody smiling and cheering and singing, thousands of people who had come out of a long, long time of waiting, a great multitude now celebrating a great victory they had been waiting for, for a long, long time!

Take all that joy, and multiply it over and over and over, and that's what it'll be like when the church celebrates our Lord's victory on the day when Christ returns. What a scene! It will dwarf any great assembling of people that has ever taken place. "A great multitude that no one could number." And from all over the world. From all of human history. All the believers from all the centuries, from Old Testament and New, Jews and Gentiles, everyone who has trusted in God's promise of sending a Savior. It will be the greatest celebration that has ever occurred, for the greatest victory that has ever been won! (Charles Henrickson)

That's your future, in Jesus. No matter how bad things may get, no matter how many tears and how much blood is shed, no matter how much we may hunger and thirst, no matter how imperfect life is on this side of eternity, it all comes out good and right in Jesus. In the end, we'll be vindicated by the Lamb who died, but lives. And God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. For now, what do we do? We trust. We take the Lamb at His Word. We hear His voice, and follow Him, through an imperfect world of suffering and death, to life that has no end. (Cwirla)

In church, and especially in preaching, there's often a cry to make it "relevant". Make the sermon relevant to my life. Bring it down to earth and make it relevant to me. Living in an imperfect world of sin and brokenness, what could be more relevant than bringing us up to heaven, giving us a vision of what's to come, bringing hope and perfection to a hopelessly imperfect world, taking us beyond what's right before us to where we're destined to be?

A perfect world? Not in this world. Don't be fooled into having such high, unrealistic expectations of what to expect in this world. Jesus said, "*In this world, you will have trouble.*" Boy, was He right. "*But ... take heart, [have hope] I have overcome this world! In Me, you shall have peace.*"

In this imperfect world of sin and suffering and injustice, there is One who is with us. We're not spared tribulation. We go through it, together with Jesus. And with Him, we come out of it. Jesus isn't a way *around* the dark valley of the shadow of death, He's the only way *through* it.

Hope. We can't live very long without it. The Apostle Paul declares that we do what in our sufferings? We rejoice. Why? Knowing that suffering produces patient endurance, and patient endurance character, and character hope. Hope that doesn't disappoint. And he adds that our present sufferings aren't worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us! (Rom 5, 8) *So we fix our eyes not on what is seen [all around us and in us], but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.* (2 Cor 4:18)

In the morning when I rise, give me Jesus. And when I am alone, give me Jesus. And when I come to die, give me Jesus. Living now, in view of what's to come.