

The Church Without Borders

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

5th in a six-part series

June 12, 2022

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Revelation 7:1-4, 9-17 (NIV)

After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. ² Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: ³ “Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.” ⁴ Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.

⁹ 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. 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 shelter them with his presence.

¹⁶ ‘Never again will they hunger;
never again will they thirst.
The sun will not beat down on 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.’”

Here’s the question of the day: Who can withstand God’s judgment?

The Great Multitude. The Church Universal. The Church without borders.

This week we return to the throne room and the Lamb of God, the only One worthy to open God’s scroll. When the Lamb takes the scroll, he begins to open one seal after another. The first seal brings forth a rider with a bow, the second a rider with a sword. The opening of the third seal sets loose a rider bringing economic devastation. And the fourth seal brings a rider on a pale horse; it is Death. Each of these brings us nothing new, nothing of which we don’t already have plenty by our own doing.

The fifth seal

The opening of the fifth of the seven seals doesn’t bring another rider, but, instead, shifts our attention to the altar in the throne room. There, we now see, are Christian

martyrs hiding underneath the altar. John tells us that these are the souls of believers who have been killed because of their testimony.

There is only one thing these martyrs want to know. How long?! How long?! How long until God's redemptive work is done? How long until justice "rolls on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream" (Amos 5:24)?

Yes, the martyrs desire vengeance for the blood that has been spilled, the lives cut short. Of course they do. Though Jesus calls us to forsake vengeance, the truth is that revenge lies close to our hearts. From beginning to end, the Bible is honest, if nothing else. Scripture doesn't ignore our deepest and even our darkest desires. The martyrs want vengeance, and we must acknowledge that reality if Revelation is going to make sense to us. It is their book too.

So their cry rings out: How long?! These martyrs are told to "wait a little longer" (6:11) But why should they wait for the fulfillment of God's promises to them? Why can't the suffering end immediately? What point could there possibly be in letting things drag out? We'll have to wait until the eleventh chapter to get some answer to those questions.

The sixth seal

The martyrs wait under the altar in the throne room, the victims of humans' judgment. Now those who rendered that judgment must stand under God's judgment.

The story of the sixth seal is told in towering cosmic terms taken from Isaiah, Joel and Amos. As the sky falls, the sun turns black, and all the earth is in upheaval, kings and generals, the rich and powerful, and all those who've embraced and perpetuated the ways of a fallen world, run and hide. Of course, there is nowhere to hide. The entire earth has been scrubbed flat. In the powerful imagery of Revelation, all the mountains and islands of the earth have been removed. There are simply no hiding places left (though mountains and caves mysteriously reappear in verse 15¹). Besides, could one ever hope to hide from God?

As the martyrs cry out, "How long 'til God's justice rolls?," the kings of the earth cry out, "Who can withstand the judgment of God?"

The kings are about to get their answer.

The Great Multitude

Though we'd expect the seventh seal to be opened at this point, instead John sees angels at the four corners of the earth and another holding up God's seal. Such seals were used in the ancient world to authenticate documents, to mark them as belonging truly to the sender. The seals were distinctive, one person to the next. And the seal the angel holds belongs to the LORD God Almighty.

John then *hears* the number of 144,000 persons who are sealed with the seal held by the angel. $144,000 = 1,000 \times 12 \times 12$. A thousand was about high as numbering went with the Jews. "Myriad" was higher, but a thousand was most often used to convey a really, really large quantity – not the specific count between 999 and 1001. As with the 24 elders, the two "12's" here probably speak to the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles. John may have something else in mind, but given what happens next, this explanation makes the most sense.

The interpretive key here is found in chapter 5. There John wonders whether anyone will be found who is worthy to open the scroll. One of the twenty-four elders gathered around the throne tells John of the Lion of Judah. But when John turns to look, he sees

¹ This is one of the numerous times in Revelation it is clear that the story is not linear, nor are these events something a video camera could capture. We are told that the earth is scrubbed flat and then in the next breath, the kings and generals are hiding in mountains and caves. Revelation is *not* akin to a movie script!!

the Lamb. John *hears* about a lion, but *sees* a lamb. Jesus is both the Lion of Judah and the Lamb of God.

The same sequence is found here in chapter 7. John *hears* the number of the 144,000 (12,000 from each of Israel's twelve tribes) but then looks and *sees* a "great multitude." *Hears* and then *sees*. The great multitude is robed in white, made white by being washed in the blood of the Lamb. They are also waving palm branches (yes, think Palm Sunday). And the multitude is comprised of "every nation, tribe, people, and language." God's salvation is for all, regardless of nationality, race, gender, or anything else – and the great multitude of Revelation 7 portrays that unifying promise.

Just as Jesus is both lion and lamb, the 144,000 and the great multitude are one and the same – all those who belong to God; i.e., those who have faith in Jesus Christ. John both *hears* and *sees*. And what are the faithful doing? Worshiping God alongside the entire company of heaven. Of course they are.

So . . . to answer the question from 6:17, "Who can withstand the wrath of God?" The answer is that it is this vast multitude, comprised of all God's people across the vast expanse of time and space. Take a few minutes and read verses 7:14 forward. So many of the Old Testament's great promises are brought together in these verses, pointing to the future that awaits those who have turned to the one true God. It comes down to this: *if you belong to Christ, you have nothing to fear from the judgment of God.*

We don't have to make it more complicated than this, though Christians keep trying. John skillfully brings together what you and I would call Old Testament and New Testament imagery to dramatically illustrate that even in the midst of a world turned against God, his people, stretching back to Abraham and forward to Christ's return, stand united in their commitment to and worship of the LORD God – forever and ever. This vast multitude, stretching across time is what we often call the Church, or even, as we say in the Apostles' Creed, the "holy catholic Church."

The catholic/universal² Church

Simply put, the Church, aka the Body of Christ, is the worldwide community of believers, encompassing not only the living, but the believers who have died. We gather in churches to worship, to pray, to care for one another, and to go about the work given us by Christ. But the Church is not the buildings, it is the people. The Church includes believers of all the various denominations, large and small, including: Methodist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Southern Baptist, Lutheran, the Church of Christ, and so on.

There are many images of "the Church" in the Bible. It is we who are God's sheep, protected and cared for by the Good Shepherd. We are also, as Paul puts it, the Body of Christ. We are his eyes and his hands and his feet in this world. We are a fellowship that was formed by God, in the person of his Holy Spirit, and is sustained by that same Spirit. Indeed, Paul refers to us as God's temple, in whom God's Spirit dwells. We are, as Peter puts it, a "chosen race, a holy nation . . . God's own people." And there is only one thing that we have in common, our faith, i.e., our trust, in Jesus Christ. Faith in Jesus Christ is our one and only badge of membership, not race or gender or geography, nor our obedience to a set of rules nor our conformity to a particular set of doctrines.

A holy Church

To say that God is "holy" is to say that God is, well, God. It is God who is inherently holy in himself; all other holiness is derived from God. Holiness is not an attribute of God. As Aulen put it, "holiness is the foundation on which the whole conception of

²In the UMC hymnal, the word "universal" is rightly footnoted as an acceptable substitute for "catholic" which is simply an archaic word for "universal." The "Roman" catholic church is one part of the larger Church universal.

God rests.” In its magnificent and stirring scenes of worship, the book of Revelation strives to drive home to us that God is truly holy. Further, because God is just and good and righteous, because God *is* love (1 John 4:8), there is an ethical and moral dimension to holiness.

Thus, all Christians stand with the great multitude, worshiping our Lord and praising the wondrous mercies of God. Mustering all the gratefulness our hearts can offer, we anticipate the day when God will lead us to springs of living water and wipe away every tear from our eyes (Rev. 7:17).

Questions for Reflection

1. So many Christians come to Revelation expecting to find nothing but bizarre monsters, obscure symbols, and terror. We’ve now been through the first seven chapters, the first third of the book. What has surprised you the most in the chapters? What have been some of your overall impressions so far? What do you think God would want you to most hear from these chapters?
2. What do you make of the statement “There is no healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship with the church?” Do you agree? Has this been your own experience? What does this statement imply about our life in the church? What does it mean to you to think of yourself as part of a family that encompasses all Christians? Jesus certainly thinks that the family of disciples is the family that has first call on our lives (see Matthew 12:46-50, for example).
3. We don’t suffer for being Christians, though many Christians in other places do. How do you think your reading of Revelation would change if you and your family were being persecuted for your faith in Jesus Christ? How can we get emotionally closer to the suffering experienced by these believers?

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Isaiah*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *1 Corinthians*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott’s Facebook ministry page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”.

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by “Scott Engle Bible Studies”.

Scott’s Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

We are on a journey through the biblical story, *God-Is*. Each week, we will follow the sermon at 9:30 and dig a little deeper into the Scriptures for that week.

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott’s YouTube channel. Search for “Scott Engle.” These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.