

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory	Pastor/Teacher
Number:	70	Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Revelation 7:9-17	
Date:	December 1, 2019 (a.m.)	

THE TRIUMPHANT CHURCH (Part I)

The expression “You can’t see the forest for the trees” is used of someone so preoccupied with all the details they can’t see the big picture. This happens over and over again when we look at how the book of Revelation has been handled down through the centuries, but especially over the last hundred years. Hal Lindsey and Tim LaHaye both wrote dozens of books (that sold in the millions) that popularized a certain approach to interpreting the Biblical prophesy that actually distorts the Scriptures. Vern Poythress, in his very helpful book on Revelation, writes: “Can the book of Revelation be understood? Yes, it can. Its message can be summarized in one sentence: God rules history and will bring it to its consummation in Christ. If you read it with that main point in mind, you will be able to understand it. You will not necessarily understand every detail – neither do I. But it is not necessary to understand every detail in order to profit spiritually from it. The same thing is true of all Scripture. Scripture is inexhaustibly rich, so that we can never plumb all its depths and mysteries. But the main points are clear, so we can know what to believe and how to act (Prov. 1:1-7; Ps. 19:7-13). Second Timothy 3:16-17 tells us not only that all Scripture is inspired, but also that it is *useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.* All Scripture, including Revelation, has practical value for exhortation, comfort, and training in righteousness. Paul underlines this point in 2 Timothy 4:1-5 by drawing a contrast between the solid teaching of the gospel and people’s desire to have teachers who *say what their itching ears want to hear* (4:3). God gave us Revelation not to tickle our fancy, but to strengthen our hearts.”¹

- I. ***THE BIG PICTURE: WHAT IS THE THEME OF REVELATION?*** The theme of this book is: *The Victory of Christ and of his Church over the Dragon (satan) and his Helpers.* The Apocalypse intends to show you, dear believer, that things are not what they *seem!* The beast that comes up out of the abyss *seems* to be victorious. He *makes war with them, overcomes them, and kills them. And their dead bodies lie in the street of the great city, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. And from among the peoples and tribes and tongues and nations do men look upon their dead bodies three days and a half, and suffer not their dead bodies to be laid in a tomb. And they that dwell on the earth rejoice over them, and make merry; and they send gifts one to another; because these two prophets tormented them that dwell on the earth.* But this rejoicing is premature. In reality it is the believer who triumphs. We read: *And after the three days and a half the breath of life from God entered into them, and they stood upon their feet; and great fear fell upon them that beheld them . . . the dominion over the world became the dominion of our Lord and of his Christ; and he shall reign forever and ever.*
 - A. ***The Centrality of Jesus Christ.*** Throughout the prophecies of this wonderful book the Christ is ever pictured as the Victor, the Conqueror, 1:18; 2:8; 5:9 ff; 6:2; 11:15; 12:9 ff; 14:1, 14; 15:2 ff; 19:16; 20:4; 22:3. He conquers death, Hades, the dragon, the beast, the false prophet, the men who worship the beast, etc. *He* is victorious; hence, so are *we!* Even when we seem to be hopelessly defeated.

B. *The People of God: The Saints.* Do you see that band of believers? Are their garments splashed and filthy? They wash their robes and make them white in the blood of the Lamb, 7:14; 22:14. Are they *in great tribulation*? They come out of it, 7:14. Are they killed? They stand upon their feet, 11:11. Are they persecuted by the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet? In the end you see them standing victoriously on Mount Zion. Rather, you see the Lamb, and with him a hundred and forty-four thousand, having his name, and the name of his Father, written on their foreheads, 14:1. They triumph over the beast, 15:2.²

II. *THE HEAVENLY CONGREGATION.* “One of the great themes of Scripture is God’s election. The 144,000 clearly portrays this in 7:1-8.³ Equally prominent – and the perfect complement – is the theme that God’s people are vast in number. Consider Genesis 22:17, in which God promised Abraham, *I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore.* This second theme is evident here. John saw a **great multitude that no one could count.** That they are beyond number exaggerates for effect, for God numbers them and calls them each by name. Clearly these are multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual – people **from every nation, tribe, people and language.**”⁴ “John saw a multitude before the throne that was too large to count. This multitude includes all whom God elected to salvation: the believers of the Old Testament, the saints and martyrs of the New Testament, and the elect who were still alive on earth when the last trumpet call was sounded. The four-word description *nation, tribe, people and language* symbolically indicates all the elect from the earth. The multitude of believers that stands *before the throne and in front of the Lamb* (verse 9) strikes a sharp contrast to those who tried to hide *from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb* (6:16).”⁵

A. *Their Clothing.* Greg Beale, who was our Lloyd Jackson speaker in 2017, has written the definitive commentary on the book of Revelation, which has an excellent section on the garments the saints are wearing: “That they have *washed their robes . . . in the blood of the Lamb* points to an identification of the saints’ endurance throughout the church age with that of Jesus’ own suffering (see likewise on 6:9; 12:11). This identification could be enhanced by the strikingly similar portrayal of Jesus in 19:13 as *clothed with a robe dipped in blood.* Therefore, that *they washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb* in 7:14 means that, despite resistance, they have continued believing in and testifying to the Lamb’s death on their behalf, which has taken their sin away and granted them salvation (the aorists refer to action performed by the saints on earth during the tribulation). Herein lies the reason for their victory over the world (so also, 12:11) and for their song of praise in 7:10 ascribing their *salvation* or *victory* to the Lamb. Consequently, they have been *clothed in white robes* to signify their redemptive purity (*peribēblāmenous stolas leukas*, 7:9; almost identically 7:13). This generally reflects the OT metaphor of cleansing polluted garments, which connotes forgiveness of sins in Isa. 1:18; 64:6; Zech. 3:3-5. The tribulation has refined their faith. It has tested them, and their perseverance through the trial has proven their faith as genuine. This is especially clear from Rev. 6:9-11, where *those who were slain because of the word of God and because of the testimony that they maintained* were given a *white robe* (*stalā leukā*). Likewise, the twenty-four elders in 4:4 are *clothed in white garments* (*peribēblāmeous en himatiōus leukois*), probably because of their perseverance through suffering for the faith. Conversely, those in the church who compromise and do not witness to Christ because of trials have *soiled garments* (3:4). Such compromise demonstrates ungentle faith (cf. 21:8). The metaphor of making oneself *white* by persevering in faith through tribulation is found in the OT only in Daniel 11-12. Dan. 11:35 affirms that oppression and suffering come *in order to refine, purge, and make them white until*

the end time (so also 12:10; cf. *ekleukainō* [*be made white*] in Dan. 12:10 [Theod.] and *leukainō* [*make white*] in Rev. 7:14). The LXX of Dan. 11:35 replaces the MT's *in order to refine, purge, and make them white* (*lābēn*) until the end of time with *to cleanse* (*katharisaī*) themselves and in order to be chosen out, even *in order to be cleansed* (*eis to katharisthānai*) until the time of the end. This change has the saints cleansing themselves and being cleansed by the end-time trial, which is part of God's purpose of election (though *eklegomai* [*choose, select*] could just as well be a refining metaphor in the sense of *selected out* as a result of a purifying process; the Greek represents Hebrew *bārar*, which can have the same two meanings). Theod. has *in order to test them by fire and to choose and in order that they should be manifested at the time of the end* (the implied subject of *to test* and *to choose* must be God because of the decretive nature of the verse). The LXX of 12:10 adds to the other MT and Greek terms that *many should be sanctified* (*hagiasthōsi*). Therefore, the image of saints with *cleansed, white robes* in Rev. 7:9, 14 and elsewhere in the book connotes a purity that has been demonstrated by persevering faith in Christ's redemptive death (= *blood*), that faith tested by a purifying fire. 3:18 emphasizes the aspect of purification by nearly equating the exhortations to *buy . . . gold refined by fire in order that you should become rich* and to *buy white garments in order that you should clothe yourself*. The reference in ch. 7 is a fulfillment of the Daniel 11-12 preview of the latter-day tribulation, where the saints are *made white* through the *refining, purging, and cleansing* fire of persecution, so that they come out as undefiled and blameless (cf. 14:4-5). This is yet another way in which the saved multitude from the nations are identified as authentic Israel. For it is they who fulfill the Daniel prophecy concerning the tribulation that the remnant of faithful Israel was to endure. Consequently, the ideas of the saints *cleansing* or *washing* themselves and of them *being made white* are both found in Daniel's expectation of the final distress, which is thus the most plausible background for these ideas' presence in Rev. 7:14 (*katharizō* [*cleanse*] and [*wash*] are sometimes virtually synonymous in the LXX – e.g., Lev. 13:58-59; 14:1-11; the white robes are also called *clean* [*katharos*] in Rev. 15:6; 19:8, 14). This confirms further the link seen above with the same context of Daniel. And this OT background is also implicit in Rev. 3:4b-5a, where those receiving *white robes* have their names written in *the book of life*, a partial allusion to the book of life in Dan. 12:1-2. Bauckham has confirmed the presence of the Daniel 11-12 background in Rev. 7:14, highlighting even the parallel of the reflexive nuance of the verbs in Dan. 12:10 and the Revelation text.”⁶ (To be continued.)

ENDNOTES

¹ V. Poythress, *The Returning King: A Guide To The Book of Revelation* (P&R, 2000), p. 11.

² This section is adapted from Wm. Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of The Book of Revelation* (Baker, 1939), pp. 12-13.

³ The difference between the 144,000 and the great multitude is not just a matter of size and ethnicity. They also have contrasting functions. The 144,000 are soldiers. We know this by the way that they are counted out – twelve thousand from each of the twelve tribes. It is the roll call of a mighty force, the army of the Lion of Judah, an echo of the military census of the Israelites in the wilderness (Num. 1:1-3). By contrast, the great multitude is a company of martyrs. These are the people of the slaughtered Lamb. Paul Spilsbury, *The Throne, The Lamb & The Dragon* (IVP, 2002), p. 75.

⁴ K. H. Easley, *Revelation: Holman New Testament Commentary* (Holman, 1998), p. 128.

⁵ W. D. Mueller, *Revelation: People's Bible Commentary* (Concordia, 2005), p. 87.

⁶ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1999), p. 436.