

## Enough... To Be Clean Again

### Revelation 7:9-17

We don't read much from the book of Revelation, and I don't preach much from the book of Revelation. Some people think Revelation is scary, an apocalyptic vision of death of destruction; they've seen too many TV preachers with charts and graphs showing the end of the world. And if that's what it is, they say I'd rather not read it. Others think Revelation is just too confusing – they hear that it is imagery and poetry and prophecy woven together in a vision that is hard to understand. So they figure they'll stick with what makes sense, and leave Revelation to others. And yet, Revelation is beautiful, and hopeful, and it contains the promises of God to you who are living here in this world. Revelation was written to strengthen the faith of those read it; it was written to fan the courage, to galvanize the resolve, and lift the hope of those who were suffering for their faith under an oppressive Roman government. All the imagery, and the prophecy, and the poetry of Revelation comes down to this: God wins and evil loses.

Revelation was written by a man named John who was imprisoned on the island of Patmos and saw a vision and wrote it down. As John was brought before the throne the God, he was brought to the most special place in heaven; to the place of great honor. He looked there and saw a crowd of people that no one could count, a great multitude; a cloud of witnesses, of martyrs, and saints. They were from every nation, every race, every clan, every language, and every kind; there was every color, and every height, and every face. Standing before the throne and before the Lamb—the Lamb is Christ—and they were robed in white, waving palm branches. White is the color righteousness, palm branches symbolize victory; these are saints in a celebration. They were worshipping God, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God, and to the Lamb!" And at this everyone fell on their face and worshipped God singing.

One of the elders of heaven asked John, who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from? John is a little overwhelmed by it all; he's having this vision, but who is he to say who these people are? Imagine walking through someone else's house and seeing pictures on the wall, and a person who lives there says to you, "Who are these people, and where do they come from?" John is confused, and says back, "Sir, you are the one who knows." The elder says these are they who have come out of the great ordeal." Another translation puts it, "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."

Do you have any idea how hard it is to get clothes white again? Anybody can wash darks, I can wash darks. Squirt some stuff on it, throw it in, and you're done. A stain gets on pair of jeans, and as long as you get it mostly out you'll never see it. But if a stain gets on a white shirt, that's art and craft. It takes the art of home economics to get stains out of white shirts. Barbecue sauce, ketchup, coffee, wine; a three course meal spilled down the front. Dirt and grime around the collar and sleeves. Gravy and cranberry sauce from Thanksgiving on the white

table cloth. Socks, and towels, and sheets. Washing these clean requires half-a-dozen tricks and a closet of special chemicals and the experience to know just how to use them.

Why is this elder talking about washing clothes? Here they stand before a countless crowd that no one can number, all worshipping God at the throne and before the lamb. Who are these, the elder asks? These are they who have come out of the great ordeal and *washed their robes and made them white* in the blood of the Lamb. *This* is the most significant thing about them, what they're wearing? Their clothes are a metaphor for their lives.

It's impossible in the course of living a day to keep your clothes clean. You'll never look better than you look in the morning! You get dressed for the day, look in the mirror – and that's as good as it will be all day. Through the course of a day – eating meals, and sitting down in different places, and bumping into walls or people, up and down on your knees, sweating in your clothes – it's impossible to stay clean. And that is a metaphor for life. It is impossible to live a life that never gets dirty, never gets stained, and never gets marked. In part, I'm talking about sin. There are things we do in the course of life that hurt the people around us, and there things that hurt people we've never seen and will never know. There are habits and behaviors that demean our neighbors near and far, even people we've never met. There are addictions and attitudes that crush the people in our lives and wound their souls. At some point there is a moment of recognition in which we see these things, we look at ourselves and say how did I get so dirty? I used to be clean, and now I'm walking around with stains. So we try to get clean, scrub the stains out – we call that making amends – put ourselves together again. But you can't get it all out. You can't get it all clean. It's impossible to live a life that never gets dirty, and part of that is about sin.

The other part of that, though, is just life. A few years ago I was walking downtown to have breakfast with a friend. I was walking along the sidewalk and it had rained the night before. It was in the morning, so I'm clean – you know, you look your best in the morning. And this car comes barreling down Harrison Street, right through a puddle, splashes water and mud all over me. What are you going to do? So I went to breakfast. That's life. It's impossible to go through life without being stained and marked. Sometime these are the marks of deep disappointment, of a dream that will never come to life, of an opportunity that never knocked, of potential that will never be realized. Sometimes these are the marks of regret, for words that cannot be taken back, for chances that were missed, moments that were lost. Often these are the marks of loss, of losing the ones you love. Every life that touches ours forms a connection that cannot be broken; even in separation and death there is still a connection. The memory, the stories, the legacy; it leaves a mark. On this All Saints Day, I especially remember the saints who have gone on before, and the loss I feel because they are not here. At some point you realize your life has become marked. I used to not have these spots, and now I'm marked. So we try to get clean, scrub the marks out – we call that moving on – and put it behind us. But you can't get it all out. You can't get it all clean.

It's impossible to live a life that is not marked and stained; stained by sin, marked by disappointment, by regret, by loss, by death. That's the why the elder in John's vision talked about the clothes of these people around the throne. They washed their clothes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. They made them clean, and not only clean, but *white* again. All the stains of sin – all those stains we tried to get out but couldn't quite – finally come clean. All the marks of life -- the hurts and disappointments and losses that we tried to put away but couldn't quite – are washed away. This is a vision of heaven. This is restoration. This is wholeness. This is God's promise – that all will be well, and all manner of things will be well. This is what God promises to do, yes when we die go to be with the Lord, but also one day for all people and all creation. No hunger, no scorching heat, no thirst, no tears. No tears. For us who are coming through a great ordeal that we call life, this is hope. That dawn will break one day and the sun will never set; the robe will be white again, and never be stained or marked. No goodbyes, no sunset, no tears.

How is this possible? Through the blood of the Lamb. They washed their robes white in the blood of the Lamb. But that doesn't make any sense! It's a mystery – God's ways are full of mystery. It's a mystery how through the brokenness of one man, the brokenness of all can be healed. It's a mystery how through the death of one, the way is opened to a deathless life. It is that mystery that we embrace around this table, as we take the bread and lift the cup, and say with the crowd robed in white, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" Amen.