

We're continuing our look into the book of Revelation. Most people find this book hard to understand and a bit strange. I was in that camp. As a kid I got my Missionette required reading of the book in and set it aside. Too strange. I didn't see what others said was in there, so I assumed the book was for grown ups and not for kids to understand. But when I finally came back to it I realized there's so much beauty and goodness in this book because first and foremost it's a book about Jesus. In fact, that's what the opening line tells us. **"The revelation of Jesus Christ."** **Revelation 1:1** It's also a book filled with songs and prayers and hope and promised redemption finally come to pass. In Revelation 5 John is told to look at a lion but what he sees is a lamb looking as if it had been slain. Sometimes what John expects to see is not what is right in front of him, and sometimes what he hears does not line up with what he sees. It's a reoccurring theme within the book of Revelation. Not all is as it seems, and the danger is that we get so distracted by all that John is describing that we miss Jesus. So as a reminder – when we read Revelation: Don't lose sight of the lamb. In Revelation 7 John is going to hear one thing and see another. What he sees surpasses anything he could have imagined. It's so much better than what he'd heard and read and understood. There's so much more to the story and what he sees causes all that he'd heard in the scripture to make even more sense. Because that's the thing with Jesus – it just keeps getting better. So what does John see?

Well, first we have to understand what John had heard. He would have been familiar with the promise God had given to Abraham that his descendants would be more numerous than the stars in the sky. In other words so many that you could not count them. John knew this promise as well as every other Jew, but to date it was still possible to count everyone – remember it was still in John's lifetime that the Roman government had issued a decree

that all the world should be taxed and were registered. If it sounds familiar it's the Christmas story and why Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem. So, John knows the promise, has heard the promise, but he's not seen it fulfilled.

John knows that the people of Israel were given land, which was to be their inheritance, but that they'd lost it due to their rebellion against God. And, John knows the words of the prophet Isaiah. If you've been reading the whole Bible plan with us this year then you know the words of Isaiah because we've just finished reading it. I'll catch us all up.

Isaiah begins his book telling us Israel has become a sinful nation, a brood of evildoers, who have become corrupt and have forsaken the Lord. That's chapter 1:4. Judgment is about to be poured out on Israel for their sins. Isaiah is called to take a difficult message to the people and to preach it until the cities of Israel lie in ruin and have no one left because they've all been taken into exile – that's not usually how we measure success for a ministry – until you've run it all into the ground – but whatever. However, last week Pastor Brian showed us that words of judgment are often followed by redemption, and coming destruction is often paired with future hope. So deep within the curse of the serpent in the Garden of Eden was the promise of redemption which would be fulfilled by Jesus. And we see a similar thing here - even as God through the prophet Isaiah speaks of coming gloom and despair and the destruction of the land He had given to His people; He also spoke of a future king in the line of David who would establish peace and rule with justice and righteousness, and this too would be fulfilled by Jesus.

Isaiah continues and prophecies future judgment on the nations that have come against Israel and then the complete devastation of the earth in chapter 24. In fact, it's very reminiscent of the destruction John saw as the Lamb opened the seals in Revelation 6. But,

then even as Isaiah tells of all this he again speaks of redemption saying that because of all that's happened to these nations and because Jerusalem would be in ruins the peoples would actually return to God and would honor Him once more. **"Therefore strong peoples will honor you; cities of ruthless nations will revere you. You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat...On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine - the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all people, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The Lord has spoken. In that day they will say, Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the Lord, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation."** Isaiah 25:3-4, 6-9

John knows that Isaiah foresaw a day when nations who were once enemies of God and God's people would be invited to the table, a day when God would draw His own people to Himself once again. A day when the funeral shroud that had covered the world would be swallowed up and death, darkness, and destruction would no longer reign. This too would be fulfilled by Jesus and John knew this as well. And, though he'd begun to see Gentiles come to faith, though John knew that salvation was on offer to all the people, though he'd heard about this day, longed for this day, he'd not yet seen a day where the tears had all been wiped away from faces. Is this what John is about to see in chapter 7?

The words of the prophet Isaiah continue. Isaiah writes of praise that will erupt in that day when God restores Israel and delivers her from the punishment for sin that is still coming.

He writes words of comfort for Israel letting her know she's not been forgotten by God, reminding her that she's been chosen, and that He will sustain her even during the years of captivity. Because again words of judgment often come with words of redemption and words of destruction often are paired with words of hope. Isaiah wrote prophetically about Babylon, the nation that would take Israel captive, they would eventually fall and Isaiah sees that a king will be raised up from there who will send the people of Israel back to the land they'd been given by God. But, they're also reminded that the only one who is actually their source of help is not this distant, foreign king who would be used by God to accomplish His purposes, but it's God alone. God alone reigns supreme and is in control. The promise of a restored Israel before they've even been exiled must have brought hope to those who were listening to the prophets. John knew all of this – knew the words of the prophets about the restoration of Israel – it's why John had had his mother ask Jesus if when He restored the kingdom of Israel could John sit on one side of His throne and his brother James on the other side and be political appointees in His government. John had heard about the restoration of Israel – it's why as Jesus was preparing to ascend into heaven in Acts 1 – like literally already off the ground the disciples, John included, are yelling – so is it now? Are you restoring the kingdom of Israel now? Are you going to be king? And, a king to re-unite Israel and restore her to a place of prominence and prestige among the nations would have been good, but it would have been too small. Anytime we limit God to one place, or one time in history, or one people group we are guilty of the same thing. We're thinking too small when God has something much larger in mind. We're looking for good when God has something so much better planned.

So, Isaiah tells us that what would be better than a king for one nation would be a Savior for the whole world. Isaiah 49 begins with a call for the whole world to listen up – islands and distant lands. Then the true Servant of the Lord begins to speak. It's not Isaiah saying this about himself. God is talking about the role of His Servant. John Oswalt, a scholar on the writings of Isaiah, said, the Servant is particularly called, equipped and kept for the task. That task is to reveal God and the splendor of His majesty to all the people. The Servant becomes yet another name for the Messiah. It's through the Messiah that God will display His Splendor, through Jesus that He will accomplish His purposes in redeeming Israel. God had always had a plan to rescue the nations and bring salvation to the whole world. God's heart for the world is seen here in Isaiah 49, **"And now the Lord says— he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord and my God has been my strength— he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." This is what the Lord says—the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel— to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, to the servant of rulers: "Kings will see you and stand up, princes will see and bow down, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you." This is what the Lord says: "In the time of my favor I will answer you, and in the day of salvation I will help you; I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people, to restore the land and to reassign its desolate inheritances, to say to the captives, 'Come out,' and to those in darkness, 'Be free!' "They will feed beside the roads and find pasture on every barren hill. They**

will neither hunger nor thirst, nor will the desert heat or the sun beat down on them. He who has compassion on them will guide them and lead them beside springs of water. I will turn all my mountains into roads, and my highways will be raised up. See, they will come from afar— some from the north, some from the west, some from the region of Aswan.” Shout for joy, you heavens; rejoice, you earth; burst into song, you mountains! For the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.” Isaiah 49:5-13

It was too small a thing to just restore Israel after exile. Instead, salvation would reach the whole world. A king would be too small because one day all the other kings and princes of every other nation will bow down because the Lord is faithful and the Holy One of Israel will have accomplished what He promised to do – to rescue and redeem the world He had created and sin had broken. In that day – a day of salvation – freedom for the captives will be granted, those living in darkness will be freed. It will be a day of restoration and redemption, a day of hope and blessing. Every need will be met, God will lead and guide, protect and care for His people. Compassion will be poured out, obstacles will be removed, healing will be granted and joy will win the day. And, this will be for all the people – from the far east, the north, the west, and Aswan, which was the southern most place Isaiah knew of. All this would be accomplished by what Isaiah would later describe as the work of the Suffering Servant – Jesus fulfills this prophecy too.

Because of Jesus work on the cross, His death, means that all other death gets swallowed up and defeated. Jesus death means salvation is secured, His blood purchased for God peoples from the north, south, east and west, His agony on the cross allows Him to free all of us who

were in captivity to our sins, His resurrection means light breaks into our darkness, it causes hope to spring up and joy to overflow.

The work of the Servant, Jesus, means God's plan to bless and redeem Israel is now extended to all who call upon the name of the Lord. Jesus death and resurrection is why the Apostle Paul could say in Ephesians that we, Jews and Gentiles (everyone who is not a Jew), have been chosen before the creation of the world and have both been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ! It's why Paul could write in Galatians that **"You are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus...there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."** Galatians 3:26-29 Jesus changes everything. The death and resurrection of Jesus means that we – you and me – are now part of the promise that God's people – Abraham's descendants would be more than the stars in the sky – this is how – because all of us who place our faith in Jesus get added into a number that can't actually be counted. Because of Jesus it means we're included in the plan to restore a broken world and redeem humanity. It means salvation has come to us.

And, this is what John knows while sitting by himself on the island of Patmos but witnessing heaven in the Spirit on the Lord's Day. In chapter 5 John was weeping until one of the elders pointed to Jesus. John saw the Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, because He had and then John heard the 24 elders and the representatives of all creation singing, **"You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people**

and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God and they will reign on the earth.” Revelation 5:9-10

This is what John knew – it would be too small a thing for Jesus just to have restored one nation, to just be concerned with one country, to only rule one place on the map as king. John had heard the promise that the descendants of Abraham would one day be more than what anyone could count. He’d heard that God so loved the whole world, and He’d heard those before the throne singing about all the people Jesus had purchased. But what did John see?

After the first 6 seals were opened, John hears something else, **“Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel...” Revelation 7:4**

Multiples of 12 keep indicating the fullness of God’s people in the book of Revelation. So John hears the totals of tribes – starting with Judah – 12,000, Reuben – 12,000. John hears the roll call and the number indicating they’re fully accounted for – Gad - 12,000, Asher – 12,000. He hears them counting Israel, but what did he see?

John hears the total number of 144,000 in verse 4, but what he sees in verse 9 is a great multitude. *****PUT UP VERSE EVEN IF I DON’T SAY IT - WHILE I KEEP PREACHING*****

“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.” Revelation 7:9

John hears them counting but what he sees could not be counted.

John had heard the descendants of Abraham would be this numerous and what he sees looks like fulfillment.

John heard the total for one nation but what he sees was all nations represented.

John heard the roll call for each tribe but what he sees around the throne were people from every tribe on earth.

John heard the people of Israel who he knew had been God's chosen but he sees those God had chosen to purchase through the blood of His Servant and Son, Jesus.

John had heard that it was too small a plan to just redeem Israel, he'd heard and witnessed its beginning days when the Holy Spirit came to that upper room and souls were added to the church but what he sees was bigger and better than anything he could have imagined.

John had heard that the Messiah would be a light to the nations but what he sees was even more beautiful than what he'd heard.

What John saw was every nation, tribe, people, language and color – how else would he know the whole world was there just by looking? They were all wearing the same thing – white robes. It was Isaiah who had explained the symbolic nature of these colors – though your sins be as scarlet they'll be white as snow. The multitude is dressed in white – not because they've lived completely pure lives, not because of what they did or the fact they had come through great persecution – they're dressed in white because of what Jesus did. It's His blood that purchased their salvation so they come to Jesus stained with sin and wash themselves in His righteousness and come out pure. The elder explained it to John like this, **"They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."** **Revelation 7:14** John sees a great multitude he cannot count made pure by Jesus blood, dressed in His righteousness and wearing white, waving palm branches as a sign of deliverance and singing, **"Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."** **Revelation 7:10** Salvation had truly and fully reached the ends of the earth.

Therefore, because the peoples from all the earth have placed their faith and trust in Jesus and in His power to save because of His death on the cross, John himself rewrites the words he'd heard from the prophet Isaiah but now sees with his eyes fully fulfilled:

“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. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon 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.” Revelation 7:15-17

All that Isaiah had written John sees fulfilled. It was too small a thing for just Israel – it was always for all the nations including Israel. And, now, all that Isaiah said – about captives being freed and those in darkness set free, about those who were hungry and thirsty having their needs met, having protection and shelter, someone to care for them, lead them, watch over them, a way to be restored and redeemed, a place of safety and health, a place where death will be swallowed up and forever defeated and tears wiped away has come to pass and that's what John saw.

Now, why does any of this matter? 3 reasons

It reminds us of our salvation.

God's plan had always been to bring salvation to all nations and all peoples. He chose you before the creation of the world and desired all along to be in relationship with you. In case you were thinking God couldn't or wouldn't save you because what you've done is too bad or wrong, in case you were thinking you could never approach God because of what you'd done, in case you were thinking you'll never measure up, you'll never be good enough –

Revelation 7 reminds us that it was never going to be about what we did or in what way we could earn our way to heaven – it was always going to be about what Jesus was going to do. It was always about Him purchasing us with His blood. The songwriter said – dressed in His righteousness alone faultless to stand before the throne – that’s how we stand before the Lord, that’s how we come to Him, that’s how we know our salvation is secure. We’re dressed in robes made pure by His blood. The Apostle Paul told Titus – We were foolish, disobedient, deceived, living for our own pleasures and passions, we lived in malice and envy being hated and hating one another – but then came Jesus and He saved us, not because of righteous things we did but because of His mercy. Why does all of this matter? Because we need to be reminded – salvation is on offer to all of us – not because of what we’ve done good or bad – but because Jesus died for us and chose us – purchased us with His death.

It also matters because

It reminds us of our mission

Jesus told His disciples to go where? – into all the world, to the very ends of the earth. Why? Because that was always God’s plan – for light to shine and salvation to come to the ends of the earth. It will not be possible for men and women of every generation from every nation and people group and tribe and language to be present around the throne unless we fulfill the mission in our own generation. Chapter 7 reminds us that we still have a job to do – to share the light of Jesus with the whole world. Maybe God is using this verse to stir in you a call to the nations. Maybe when you close your eyes there’s a specific group of people you’re seeing around the throne and you know God is saying you’ll have to go to them to share the light of Jesus and the message of salvation. Maybe it’s an age group – it’s children

in a school here in Tulsa you know you're called to shine a light to. We all need a reminder of the mission. Close your eyes for just a second. Picture Jesus on the throne. Look around – who's missing? In order for every nation to be represented in heaven we have to respond to the mission to go and make disciples of all nations. Who is God calling you to reach?

Lastly, it matters because

It reminds us to respond with worship

The multitudes John sees are crying out Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb. And once again the elders and the representatives of all creation hear their cue. The work of Jesus to save and purchase women and men from all the earth causes them to fall down before the throne and worship singing, **“Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!”**

Revelation 7:12 Worship is always our response to the fact that Jesus has saved us.

Will you stand? We're going to respond in worship. Our pastors are coming to the front – if you've not experienced salvation – if you've not asked Jesus to cleanse you of your sin and dress you in His righteousness so that you can be counted as part of that great multitude around the throne we want to pray with you to make that decision. You can slip out and come to one of our pastors right now.

Or maybe you need to dedicate your life to the mission Jesus has for you to make disciples wherever He is asking you to go. These altars are open as a place of surrender. And, we want to pray with you about that too. We want to help you pursue the call of God on your life. Who is God speaking to your heart right now about bringing His light and His message of salvation?

Or maybe you just need to respond and rejoice and bring thanks to the Lamb for saving you. Let's worship.