

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

God's Tender Actions

Revelation 7

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The end of the sixth chapter of Revelation poses a question that arises directly from the drama of the chapter but also transcends that particular chapter to many chapters in many of our lives. The question in the face of tremendous suffering is, "who can stand?" That question posed in chapter 6 sets up chapter 7, including our reading this morning. This is the emotional center of Revelation, and it is one of the most beloved passages in all of scripture, and that's considering how any reading from Revelation is starting from the back of the pack, a longshot for our affections like that horse that won the Kentucky derby yesterday. The longest of longshots, a stunning upset. Then again, that's kind of what Revelation's all about. When all seems lost, when the forces of darkness have all but prevailed, here comes hope down the backstretch. When all seems lost, here comes God.

Chapter 6 of Revelation details a series of cataclysmic apocalyptic events that each occur at the opening of each of 6 seals binding the sacred scroll. It's easy to get lost in all the imagery or intimidated by it, so easy, but the point is that this chapter puts before us hyperbolically cascading tragedies, one after another after another. Scholars say this is characteristic of the way apocalyptic writing style describes the world. It's not intended to be taken literally per se; it's means so much more than that.

But I don't have to tell you that a description of suffering doesn't have to be taken literally as written to feel its weight in your own life. You don't have to have the scroll or the seals or the riders of horses coming to have your own cascading previously unimaginable suffering.

Revelation pictures cosmic destructions; its 1st century history tells us about persecutions and the power of Empire. You may very well have your own. Maybe you've come to a moment when you've said to yourself: who could stand this? I can't take this one more day. This job, I can't stand this job. Or this marriage. I can't stand what we've become. Or this body. Look at myself. Or this house or this stress or that problem. Or myself. I can't stand myself and what I've become.

Who can stand? The apocalyptic scenes cascading in chapter 6 bring the narrative in Revelation to the emotional apex which is already inhabited by so many people, and most people at some point when their knees buckle and they don't know if they can carry on one more step. For all the noise that always roars around reading Revelation, and all the strange and terrifying aspects of it, this familiar, tender, broken-hearted place is the emotional center. Life can be really hard. It can be dark. Who can stand?

To be sure, life's not always like that. Let's not be overly maudlin here. Life can be beautiful. Both can be true at the same time. The earth can be threatened and desecrated, but beauty still

explodes like flowers in the spring after a rain, like these grandmother trees sheltering us from the sun, embracing us in their ongoing praise of God. And I believe that is what they're doing. Revelation isn't for people walking on the sunny side of the street. It's for moments that matter, for days that turn dark and the weeks and months and years. It's for those made powerless by others who abuse their power, for the brokenhearted, the almost hopeless. It's for people trying to stand one more day under the weight they carry and walk one more step not knowing if they can keep going.

There's no pep talk for people suffering in Revelation, but there is hope. A vision of hope. The vision of hope. Hope is worth fighting for. Chapter 7 opens with four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding the winds back. No wind this day will blow on earth or sea or against any tree. For a time, noise ceases, raging storms go quiet; there is calm; there is hope.

At first John, our guide and narrator, hears there's a very orderly and soberly predictable, quantifiable amount of hope to be dispersed to those lucky enough to have a ticket. 144,000 equally divided between 12 ancient tribal identities of Israel. Everyone gets a little bit of something, but not enough to go around for everyone. That's what he'd heard about grace. But then he looks. And what he sees when he looks is something that exceeded the wildest imaginations of those who measure out goodness. He sees not just 144,000 from one nation but great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes, all peoples, all languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!"

Chapter 6 is the promise: life is going to be hard even though you're a Christian and sometimes hard for you just exactly because you're a Christian. Chapter 7 is the promise: you can stand. You will stand. Life will be hard but you will come through, and you will stand shoulder to shoulder in the congregation of the redeemed. Today you may not have your strength; you may not see your way forward; you may not be able to find your voice. But you will.

In one of the enduring, beautiful words of assurance in all scripture, in all prayer, in all literature, the lamb is also the shepherd who shall lead them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

As the center of the heavenly throne room that comprises Revelation's cosmic geography, God is referenced all through the book but almost every time in actions that are directed toward God or things belong to God. God is almost always passive in Revelation. In the grammar of Revelation, everything belongs to God or proceeds from God:

- The word of God
- The paradise of God
- The seven spirits of God
- The temple of God
- Priests for God;

People of God
 Throne of God
 Mystery of God

In the action, God is the subject, but not the actor. The creatures worship before God; the enemy is against God and receives the wrath of God.

God is the center of all of this, but God himself doesn't do anything or say anything. Everything swirls around God who remains in the center of it all, silent and still through the apocalyptic chaos that unfolds in the vision. Revelation is full of noise and sound and fury, but God is unmoved, unshaken, and seemingly, uninvolved. God isn't distant, but God for the most part isn't very active. We're out here wondering who can stand all of this and God remains still and silent, seated on the throne.

But not totally. When God does do something or says something in Revelation it matters tremendously. And as far as I can tell, there are only three things God does in the whole book. There are only three things that God does directly. What God does reveals God's character and shows how in God's name we can stand.

First, God *speaks*. In chapter 1 God asserts enduring faithfulness and presence. "I am the Alpha and the Omega" says the Lord God, "who was and who is and who is to come. I was at the beginning; I will be there in the end. I am now; I am with you now." Echoing the word to Moses at the burning bush, now God speaks the same word when it seems all creation on fire. It's a word of assurance and comfort in the face of all that will come. God identifies himself. *I am*. At no point in Revelation's apocalypse is God's presence or ultimate triumph in question. At no point is God's compassion in doubt. No matter what was or is or will be, we can have confidence: God is here. Even those who walk in darkness can take heart that there is light, and it will shine. God speaks a word: I Am. Who can stand? You can stand because I am with you.

Second, God *defends the defenseless* against bullies. The bully in Revelation is called Babylon. God judges Babylon decisively and harshly by chapter 18. Babylon the bully stands for Rome, and for every other brutal oppressive regime aligned against God and the peace of God's people. God defends the defenseless; God advocates for the oppressed. God chooses sides, and the side God chooses is the side of the weak, the poor, the oppressed, the persecuted. God is a mama bear protecting her cubs. Who can stand? You can stand, because I am with you.

Third, God *meets us* in our grief. In this morning's reading in chapter 7, God stands up from the throne and comes to those who have come through great tribulation. For those who have suffered, God does not send a representative on his behalf--not an angel or a messenger or a delegate, but God himself stands up from the throne--the only time we see this in the whole vision. God stands up and comes to them and wipes the every tear from their eyes. I think there's something so tender about this. We expect to see a roaring God of power. Do we expect a tender, merciful God of kindness? God himself comes to those who weep, and wipes their tears, every tear. God stays with them under every tear they need to cry has been cried. God

goes one by one by one with intimacy, comfort, consolation. We come near God in our celebrations and praises; God comes to us in our tears. Who can stand? You can stand. I am with you. I am for you. I love you.

Who can stand? You can. You can. You can take your place with all of those who come out of great tribulation, given the new clothes of redemption, new signs of victory, new songs of hope, and the tenderness of God.

You are beloved. You may feel alone or unloved some days. You may feel all alone, but know you are beloved, more than you can ever imagine or more than you could hope for. And whatever else is swirling or raging around you or within you today, you are beloved, and God is seated on the throne of the universe. And nothing will take his place.

And look: God is standing and is coming your way.

Amen.

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