

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 in front of 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 spread his tent over them.**

**¹⁶ Never again will they hunger;
never again will they thirst.
The sun will not beat upon 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.”**

They're some of my favorite words from Psalm 23. David wrote about the LORD as Shepherd: “Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” We're a bit removed from the shepherding lifestyle, but can you picture the shepherd's tools? One is a rod – a straight stick, maybe with a pointy end. The shepherd usually used it to prod stubborn sheep who wouldn't move. Then there's a staff – a crook with a semi-circle. That was for pulling them at the neck if they went the wrong way.

And yet David doesn't write, “Your rod and your staff, they poke and prod and pull me.” He says, “Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” I think it says something about the kind of Shepherd the Lord is. He doesn't prod and pull – he doesn't use his power to force us to follow him. What did he say in the gospel? “My sheep listen to my voice, and they follow me.” He uses words. The message of his love and forgiveness inspires our trust and moves us to follow him willingly.

He doesn't use his power to poke and prod us; he uses it to care for us. So his rod and staff, they comfort us, even as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

It's no wonder, then, why God refers to Jesus as our Shepherd in the vision he gave John in Revelation 7. The first readers of this book were walking through a particularly dark valley as John was

writing it – God calls it a **great tribulation** here. But believers of every age can relate to them. Maybe a dark valley is what your life feels like this morning. So John’s vision is meant for our comfort, too. He holds before our eyes the Good Shepherd, and shows us where he’s leading us. The Lamb will be their Shepherd, he writes, 1) through great tribulation, 2) to great salvation.

John has seen a lot since we last found him in God’s throne room in chapter 5. He’s had a vision of seven seals being opened that showed what we can expect in this world before Jesus comes back. Some terrifying things – war and famine and plague and persecution. Some wonderful things – the gospel going out into the world to gather in believers.

Now, he’s brought back into God’s throne room to see the end results of that: All believers, gathered in glory around God’s throne. **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.**

It must have been a comforting sight for John. Remember, he was one of 12 whom Jesus sent on a mission to bring the gospel to the world. But 11 of them had already been killed for that. And now John was in exile for that. The whole church was undergoing persecution from the Roman government. False teachings were infecting churches, people were falling from faith. John had to wonder if the gospel would survive, if their work had been for nothing.

But we sometimes have similar doubts. As the number of Christians in our nation declines, and members in the WELS with it. As “Christian” churches preach anything other than Christ. As we support our congregation’s gospel ministry, but it seems that for every member we confirm, another stops coming. For all the time and money we pour into it, we sometimes see little visible success, and wonder whether it’s worth it or all in vain.

But Jesus shows John and us that it’s not. We might not see the results now, but at the end of it all, how many believers has the gospel brought in? So many that no one can even count them. From every corner of the globe – every nation, tribe, people, and language. Our gospel work is never in vain. Our offerings never misspent. Jesus’ mission will succeed. The Good Shepherd promised that: “I have other sheep...they *will* hear my voice,” he said. God lets us see the uncountable flock in heaven to assure us it’s true.

But there’s more comfort in this Lamb who is our Shepherd. It seems like a paradox at first, doesn’t it? A lamb can’t be a shepherd. But here God describes Jesus as both – and that’s exactly what we needed.

We needed a Lamb. Because...did you notice what kind of robes all the people in heaven will be wearing? The elder pointed it out: “**These in white robes**,” he asked John, “**who are they?**” There’s a spiritual dress code of sorts in heaven. Only people who wear white are allowed in. Only people who are holy, sinless, pure.

But that’s not us. We are born unclean, and we’ve added to the filth ever since. Do you see the dirt in your life? The impure thoughts you’ve harbored – of anger or lust or selfishness. The unclean things you’ve said – gossip or boasting or lies. The things your hands have done – or not done – that leave them filthy in God’s eyes. Our robes are anything but white.

And we can’t get one on our own. You can try to clean up your life, be a better person; that’s good! But it can’t save you. Because what you do isn’t ever perfect, even on your best day. Trying to wash yourself with it is like trying to scrub out a stain with a dirty rag – it just makes the mess worse.

But there is something that makes robes white. **Who are they?** the elder asked John. **Sir, you know**, John replied. **These are those who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.** Because you weren’t fit for heaven, God came to earth. The Shepherd became a sheep – a

lamb. A spotless one – Jesus never sinned! But he did that so he could carry your sins to the cross. All our filth, our dirt, every last spot and stain – he made it his and died under the punishment we deserved for it. Through faith, his blood does perfectly what we could never do – purifies you of *all* sin. The Lamb makes your robe white; the Lamb makes you fit for heaven.

You needed a Lamb. But you still need a Shepherd. What the elder said about the believers in heaven reminds us of that: Where did they come from? **These are they who have come out of the great tribulation.** Tribulation – that word in Greek is pressing, squeezing. I’m sure John’s first readers could relate – they were undergoing a persecution that was squeezing them, pressing them to give up their faith.

But **great tribulation** really describes life for all Christians living on this side of heaven. Life in a sinful world comes with pain and problems that weigh heavy on us. But there are more dangerous pressures than that. We are squeezed every day by our sinful nature to do what is evil. We are pressed by the devil every day as he tempts us to sin. Pressured by the unbelieving world around us to conform to their sinful living and adopt their godless values. Hard-pressed by forces far more powerful than us, helpless against them on our own.

But we’re not on our own. The Lamb who was slain now lives to Shepherd you. The Jesus who loved you to death on the cross now rules all things for you. He’ll use his rod and staff to guard and keep you. He’ll use the pain and problems that weigh on you to keep you close to him. In his Word, he pulls you out of the pressure cooker and into green pastures and quiet waters to give your soul rest and refreshment. He won’t let you be pressed beyond what you can bear, but will strengthen you bear it. He knows exactly what your soul needs, and in his word he never fails to provide it. No matter how powerful the enemies, Jesus is stronger; no matter how great the pressure, Jesus is holding you tighter. He promised that of his sheep: “They shall never perish. None can snatch them from my hand.”

Until one day the elder’s words are true of you: **“These are those who have come out of the great tribulation.”** They were in it; but it’s all done now. The Lamb who washed them in his blood Shepherded them safely through it. **Therefore,** this will be true of you, too: **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.**

¹⁶ **Never again will they hunger;
never again will they thirst.
The sun will not beat upon 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.”**

It might not be obvious in your bulletins, but God uses 10 phrases to describe heaven here. First, three things that you will experience in heaven. Then, 4 things you won’t experience ever again. Then, 3 things you will experience. 10 in the bible is the number of completion, of fullness, of perfection. John is describing the completion of God’s plan of salvation. The fullness of the eternal life Jesus won for you. All things made perfect again.

You will be **before the throne of God** – you’ll get to see him face-to-face in all his glory. You will **serve him day and night in his temple** – you’ll finally be free from all sin and able to love perfectly the God who has loved you perfectly all along. God himself will **spread his tent over you** – eternally safe from all harm and danger.

You won’t experience **hunger** or **thirst** ever again – you’ll never want or lack, you’ll be perfectly satisfied and content. **The sun won’t beat down on us, nor will there be any scorching heat** – especially in Houston, we’ll enjoy that one. Nothing will cause you pain or discomfort ever again.

Because **the Lamb at the center of the throne will be** there **shepherding you**. Leading you to the **springs of living water**. And whatever tears you've shed in this life? God himself will **wipe away** each one. More on that next week.

"Because I live," Jesus once told his disciples, "you also will live." And John's vision in Revelation 7 shows us what kind of life he won for us by dying and rising again: Life under the Lamb who is our shepherd. His rod and staff will give you comfort in, and bring you safely through, this life's dark valley - until you dwell in God's house forever. Amen.