

THE BEST RELATIONSHIPS ARE STILL TO COME

Eleventh in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin on *Understanding and Repairing Our Relationships* from
Revelation 7:9-17

“The Lamb in the center of the throne shall be their shepherd, and shall guide them to springs of the water of life; and God shall wipe every tear from their eyes.” Revelation 7:17

Sometime around 3:00 in the morning on June 6 the pilots of the B-26 Marauder bombers fired up their twin engines and taxied to the end of the steel-mesh runways north of London. On signal, the pilot of the lead bomber pushed his throttle full forward and the heavily-laden ship began to lumber down the right side of the runway. When he reached half way, the next plane began to roll down the left side, and so it went, one down the right, one down the left, until all the planes disappeared into the darkness. Quickly they were swallowed by clouds. They popped out again at 8000 feet into the star-studded sky and began searching for their formations. More often than not, they assembled into boxes with whatever planes they could find and droned off toward Normandy.

Their target was Hitler’s Atlantic Wall at Utah Beach. Their task was to open the way for General Teddy Roosevelt and thousands of GIs who would come pounding ashore ten minutes after the bombing stopped. The veteran pilots didn’t feel easy about this mission. They gripped their controls with sweaty palms. They’d been ordered to go in at 500 feet in order to slip under German radar and catch the enemy by surprise. But they remembered the last time B-26s had tried that tactic in 1943. They’d lost ten out of ten planes. They zeroed in on their targets and, staring down the barrels of anti-aircraft guns, flew into the heaviest flak they’d ever encountered. One plane took a hit, jerked sideways, did a complete roll, recovered, and somehow continued on. Another exploded into a fireball. In one plane the tail gunner heard a sound like the ship was ripping apart. “We’ve been hit!” he screamed into the intercom. The captain called back, “No, we’re not hit. That was the sound of our bombs going off.” They were so low they’d never heard their bombs explode before.

As the bombers circled around and headed across the Contentin Peninsula toward the English Channel and home, the crews could see the gliders who had preceded them with the airborne troops, lying splintered across the Norman countryside. One airman said he got the feeling the invasion wasn’t going too well. But it was, at least on Utah Beach. The Marauders had all but knocked the Germans out of the war. Soon they would be on the ground, their crews eating another breakfast, then assembling for their second mission of D-Day, the bombing of St. Lo.

Fifteen months ago Barb and I stood on Utah Beach where the U. S. troops came ashore. I thought about the men who had cleared the landing zone. They were my dad’s comrades. He would have been with them that day, except that he was recovering from wounds he suffered a few days earlier on another mission. But I wanted to see where these men had flown, where their bombs had dropped, where American forces had taken the first uncertain steps to free Europe from Nazi domination. I would have liked to ask my dad about that day and about the men he flew with, and about his awareness that God was present on each of the sixty missions he flew. But my dad had died ten years before.

So last Summer Barb and I attended the reunion of the 586th bomb squadron and I met some of the men Dad flew with. I talked with those who knew him. I encountered one or two he'd introduced to the Savior 62 years earlier. When the American flag was carried into the banquet room I will never forget watching one old man in a wheel chair struggle to stand. Someone gripped him by the arm and helped him to his feet. Then Barb and I and our sons stood silently with these veterans as they remembered their fallen comrades, wiping tears from their eyes and noisily blowing their noses.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day. I hope you will pause long enough to salute those who have died in the service of our country. The bodies of some of them have hardly grown cold, for the battle for freedom and truth and for right against wrong will not end till Jesus comes. As you remember them, your thoughts will inevitably turn to others who have left this life, not under force of arms, but as soldiers in the spiritual war that has torn this planet since the Garden of Eden. Today we are going to talk about them. We are going to think about those who have gone before us, about those we once loved here, and about the relationships with them we will one day resume. Turn with me to the last book of the Bible, to Revelation chapter 7. We will proceed through this passage in three parts: **1. Freedom, 2. Forgiveness, and 3. Friendship.**

1. Freedom. The book of Revelation is the book of triumph for the Christian. It is the picture of the final victory of Christ as he brings the world under his rule. It contains the vision of the final destruction of evil, and the last war and the greatest invasion in the history of the universe. It was written by the apostle John in the closing years of the first century, recording for us the visions God showed him about the end of this age and the beginning of forever. Chapter seven is a pause, if you will, just before the bombardment of God's justice begins. It is a chapter that gives the Christian an opportunity to anticipate the climactic struggle for the planet. On D-Day here in the United States, word began to spread early in the morning that the Allied invasion of Europe had begun. All across the land sirens wailed, radios broadcast the terse voice of General Eisenhower announcing the invasion. Everywhere people paused to pray. In New York Broadway shut down. Macy's closed at noon. Lord & Taylor never opened at all. President Walter Hoving said he was sending his 3000 employees home to pray. Major league baseball games were cancelled. Churches filled. In Columbus, Ohio everything stopped—everything: cars, busses, trucks--as people pulled over to pray. So it went all across the country. And in Philadelphia the Liberty Bell tolled.

That's what is happening in Revelation 7. John sees a vision of four angels holding back the winds from the four corners of the earth so that no destruction would take place. The reason? Another angel gives the answer in verse 3. *"Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees,"* he commands, *"until we have sealed the bondservants of our God on their forehead."* This is a seal of protection. God has his people marked and nothing can happen to them to prevent their safe arrival in heaven. We are among that group, you and I, if we are followers of Christ. The battle is raging around us, but God's protection ensures not that we will never be injured or that we will be spared physical death—you know that happens to God's people. But we are reminded of the words of Jesus John recorded in John 10:27-30. *"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and*

they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one." Verse 3 is a reminder of this truth. The Christian is secure in God's protection.

Notice who it is that is protected. John says in verse 4, *"I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel."* That doesn't sound like too many. The Jehovah's Witnesses, shortly after their cult was formed about a century ago, declared that this was a literal number, that of all the people in the world, only 144,000 would be saved--all of them Jehovah's Witnesses, of course. But then the JW's grew to be more than 144,000 and they had a problem! If they had read a little farther in the chapter they would have realized that 144,000 is a symbolic number. Verses 5-8 inform us that there are 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. Twelve times twelve thousand--144,000. It is a number of fullness, a number indicating all those from the Old Testament who truly loved God would be saved.

But there is more. It is not just the people of Israel we see here. In the next verse, verse 9, John describes *"a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands."* People from the whole world in every country, speaking every language there is. These are they who have been held in sin and ignorance and idolatry, ruled over by an evil prince. Now they are set free! The whole church is here, those from before the time of Christ who looked ahead to his coming, and those from the past two thousand years and on into the future, who look back to his coming. Not one of them will be lost! All of us who love Christ bear the mark of God's protection as our day of freedom comes!

What does this have to do about relationships? In heaven there will be many people we have not known, or have not known well. When I was a little boy I remember sitting in church beside my grandfather, my mother's dad. I felt so proud to be there with him, this big strong man. I was glad to be his grandson. But he died when I was quite young. What I know about him swirls in a small boy's memories or in the stories he told me, or what others have said. I don't really know him well. But he will be there in heaven, and then we'll have plenty of time to become acquainted. There will be those you look forward to knowing too. Heaven will set us free to know each other.

2. Forgiveness. Now, skip ahead to verse 13. John is marveling at this great mass of people, stretching as far as his eye can see. But he hasn't quite got it yet. So one of the elders, that is, one of the 24 elders who symbolize the church (See Revelation 5:4) explains it to him. He asks John, *"These who are clothed in the white robes, who are they, and from where have they come?"* And John doesn't know. He replies to the elder in verse 14, *"My Lord, you know."* And the elder explains. *"These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."*

He says they have come out of the great tribulation. The term, *great tribulation*, is not specific. In Daniel 12:1 the prophet refers to a great tribulation in the period between the Old Testament and the New Testament that came upon the people of Israel during the reign of the Selucid ruler, Antiochus IV Epiphanes. During his oppression God's people suffered terrible persecution. In Matthew 24:21 Jesus refers to a great tribulation that came in 70 AD when the Roman armies under Titus sacked Jerusalem, and it is recorded that the blood ran ankle deep through the streets. Here, while there may be a greater period of tribulation still to come, the term seems to refer to the general period between Christ's first and second coming. Christ's people for the last 2000 years have suffered unspeakable persecution in different parts of the world in various periods. You and I, while we do not face the hardships our brothers and sisters face in say, Muslim countries today, nevertheless dwell in the midst of an evil age where we struggle for the souls of men. We face temptations. We battle sin. We suffer and weep over the sorrows that come into our lives. So we live in the period of tribulation of Revelation 7.

Notice what the people in white robes have done. White is the symbol of purity. The elder tells John that the people in this multitude have washed their robes in the blood of Christ. That can mean only one thing. They have brought their soiled and polluted clothing--the sinful deeds they've done, the hurtful words they've spoken, the impure thoughts they've savored—they've brought these things in repentance to the cross, and there they have found forgiveness by trusting in the payment Jesus made through his death. You recall that when Jesus instituted the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, he said, "*This cup is the new covenant in My blood which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of their sins.*" (Matthew 28:20) Let's pause here a moment. Have you brought your sins to Jesus? Have you cast yourself on his mercy? Has he washed you clean? This is your only hope of surviving the great tribulation and being safely transported into heaven when your life comes to an end. This is not to be trifled with. It is the only way of escape from the judgment coming upon this world.

What does this mean for our relationships? In this life sin separates. It destroys and breaks people apart. If a sinner comes to Christ late in life he will go to heaven for sure. But there won't be time enough to heal the wounds or to rebuild what has been torn down. My dad's grandfather was an alcoholic and an abuser. He abandoned his family leaving behind a very bitter wife and three children. A few months before he died he appeared at the door of my grandfather's home and they took him in. My grandfather had just enough time to lead him to know Christ, but there were only a few months remaining until he died. It was not long enough to repair the effects of the estrangement or for father and son and grandchildren to really get to know each other as Christians. But in heaven there will be time. Some of you have parents who have abandoned you. Some of you have husbands or wives who have shattered the marriage bonds. But in the hands of Jesus, in the eternal air of heaven, healing will come and rich relationships will develop. Heaven is a place of forgiveness.

3. Friendship. One by one, the saints of God are transported into heaven. Not one will be lost along the way. You and I have seen people we've loved and cherished taken from us by death. But if they have trusted in Jesus, they are there with him now.

See what they are doing. They are not dead. They are alive and conscious and engaged in activity. Look at what they are doing. In verse 15 the elder tells John, *“They are before the throne of God and they serve Him day and night in His temple.”* In other words, the church will be engaged forever in perpetual worship. This does not mean that all you and I will do in heaven is sit in a never-ending worship service. Rather, worship is woven through everything we will do in heaven. The awareness of God’s presence and power—his rule over us—is so great, that we will never lose sight of whom we serve. Look what God does in return. Verse 15 says, *“He who sits on the throne shall spread His tabernacle over them.”* That means God is with his people constantly. He dwells with them. He is not some distant deity, some untouchable king, that you never get to see. He is there, close to his people. We will experience a constant relationship with God. If you have ever felt that God was far away; if you have ever prayed and felt like your prayers weren’t being heard; then understand that you will never feel that way again. You will be forever close to God.

Look what God does for his people. Verse 16: *“They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; neither shall the sun beat down on them, nor any heat.”* This will be an eternity of perfect abundance, of no wants or lacks. There will be no suffering. Why is that? Because, as verse 17 says, *“The Lamb in the center of the throne shall be their shepherd, and shall guide them to springs of the water of life.”* God will provide for every need.

I want you to notice especially the last phrase of verse 17. *“And God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes.”* Why do people weep? Usually it is because of loss, isn’t it? We may lose something material we have cherished, and we cry. I heard this morning that the house of a neighbor of some of our church members burned to the ground this weekend. The people escaped, but they have lost everything. I suspect that today is a day of tears for them. We weep when opportunities are lost or hopes are disappointed. We weep when people we love hurt us or reject us, because we have lost something in our relationship with them. But mostly we weep because of good-byes. Why do we cry at weddings when they are happy? Because there is also a good-bye involved. Why do we cry when someone goes on a long journey? Because there is a good-bye involved. When Barb and I left one of our sons at college, we drove away with tears. It was right for him. It was the beginning of the next stage of his life. It had to happen. But it was the end of our family as we had known it. Death is the biggest good-bye. No cell phone can connect us with the other side. But God is going to wipe every tear away. In heaven, there will be no more good-byes.

Now, put all these things together. Heaven will be a place of freedom. There will be time to grow good and rich relationships. Heaven will be a place of forgiveness. Jealousy will not be there, so no cloud will cast a shadow over our relationships. No harsh words will be spoken, no selfish actions, no things will ever be done by us or another to cause pain. But most of all, heaven will be a place of friendship. Stephen Ambrose in his book *Comrades* has written one of the most profound paragraphs on friendship that I have ever encountered. *“Friendship is different from all other relationships. Unlike acquaintanceship it is based on love. Unlike lovers and married*

couples it is free of jealousy. Unlike children and parents it knows neither criticism nor resentment. Friendship has no status in law. Business partnerships are based on a contract. So is marriage. Parents are bound by the law, as are children. But friendship is freely entered into, freely given, freely exercised. Friends never cheat each other, or take advantage, or lie. Friends do not spy on one another, yet they have no secrets. Friends glory in each other's successes and are downcast by the failures. Friends minister to each other, nurse each other. Friends give to each other, worry about each other, stand always ready to help. Perfect friendship is rarely achieved, but at its height it is an ecstasy." (New York, 1999, 106)

Jesus said, "You are my friends." And that is what he made heaven for. For friendship.

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