“GOD AND THE LAMB AND BELIEVERS IN HEAVEN”

Revelation 7:1-17

Key Verses: 7:9,10

***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 before 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.”*

Sarah and I traveled to Korea a couple of months ago. It was the first trip back to Korea for Sarah in 41 years though I have been back there recently. It was a memorable trip for us because we celebrated our 41st anniversary. We visited the same places where we had gone for our honeymoon—Seol-ak Mt and the beach in the East Coast. While we were in Korea, the members of our home church Kwanak UBF asked us to share our testimonies. So we had chance to look back on our lives.

Sarah and I were born in the middle of 1950’s. It was one of the hardest times in history for all Koreans because of the War, the war of brethren between north and south. They destroyed one another over the ideologies of communism and capitalism. Fundamentally it was a proxy war between the former USSR and the USA, which had occupied the north and the south respectively after WWII.

Sarah, who hadn’t visited Korea for four decades, saw the country had transformed from a dirt poor country, ravaged by a war, to a country which many visitors describe as a city from future. It was not totally untrue. As she and I traveled to different parts of the country, many things reminded us of scenes of futuristic science fiction movies, such as amazing digital images everywhere and jungles of tall apartment buildings. And we heard that they were planning to have automobiles flying in the air in order to avoid congested ground traffic. Just imagine cars flying between the tall buildings. That’s exactly a scene of the movie Blade Runner 2049.

The Korean people living in the futuristic cities are mostly optimistic and confident because they think they are the main actors of the economic miracle, popularly called “the Miracle of Han River.” Sarah and I shared the similar sentiment for the first one or two weeks. People walking on the streets or riding on subway trains were not like the people we knew four decades ago. They are well dressed, obviously better fed, have become taller and prettier because of good nutrition and top-class quality cosmetics. But one early morning of the third week, everything I felt about the Korean people changed. Our son Charles texted me, “What’s happening in Itaewon?” Itaewon is known as one of the most fancy and trendy places even in Seoul, Korea. At first I thought he was asking me if Sarah and I were having fun time in Itaewon. Then he again texted me with a link to a news article that more than 150 young people mostly in their teens and twenties had been crushed to death. One of Itaewon streets is very narrow and slanted. There are some fun places on that narrow street. There was supposed to be a music concert there. A large group of young people, who had gathered there for Halloween party, were coming from the top of the slanted street and the others were coming from the bottom. They were so crowded that they could not move. Then some young people said, “Push, push.” Some did push, and then there was a stampede, which caused 150 plus young people to fall and be crushed and suffocated to death.

At the news I was shocked. It was early Sunday morning. I was extremely sad. 150 plus beautiful young people in their teens or twenties perished in a moment of frenzy. In the afternoon of the same day a few of our friends were supposed to take a fun trip for fishing in the sea. I texted my friend who organized the trip, “My heart is heavy. I am not coming for the trip.” No one we knew was a victim of the tragic incident. But one Kwanak UBF member had a friend, who was killed. He left behind his beautiful wife and their three young children.

In the face of such tragedy, everything loses meaning. You cannot find joy in doing such a thing as fishing in the sea. Life itself becomes painful.

But I was a little relieved of the pain later when I heard the word of God through the message during the Sunday worship service. Pastor Chang Won Kim gave the message of the kingdom of God based on Revelation 22. In fact I had been meditating on another picture of the kingdom of God throughout our trip to Korea. That’s the passage we read--Revelation 7, especially the key verses 9,10. Let me read it again. ***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 before 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.”*

Today I want us to think why Rev 7 is relevant to the tragic incident that happened on the street of Itaewon or any other miseries and sufferings, small or great, we suffer on earth. We all are too familiar with miseries and sufferings. If any of you can refute that simple statement, let me know later. I would love to hear your blissful life story, which must sound like a fairy tale.

Living in this broken planet, called Earth, nothing works perfectly. What are you going through these days? Sick family members? Wayward children? Financial struggles? Problems in the job? In a church of this size, much larger than, Lehigh UBF, I know there are all kinds of problems and heartaches. That’s why I want us to study today’s passage. Our God is the God of all comfort. The comfort God gives us is not like Tylenol to a cancer patient. God’s comfort comes to us as His words answer our fundamental questions about life. This chapter 7 of Revelation is a vision of God’s comfort because it shows who we believers are on the earth and what our ultimate destiny is as our life here is over.

Rev. chapter 7 is an interlude between the sixth and seventh seals of chapter 6 and 8 respectively. In this interlude the Apostle John saw two scenes. In the first scene he saw the 144,000 having the seal of the living God in vv. 1-8 and in the second he saw the glorious picture of a multitude of saints before God’s throne and the Lamb in the rest of the chapter. The 144,000 represent God’s people on earth in perfect order and thus are ready to march. This is interpreted to be the church militant, poised and ready to carry out the marching orders—the mission—that her Lord has given to her. That’s you and me if you are indeed genuinely saved people, who are ready to serve God and carry out His mission of preaching the gospel and making disciples of all nations. There are some groups of people who interpret this passage literally and say the 144,000 are Jews because the twelve tribes of Israel are mentioned. If you are among those groups of people, we can have a separate discussion about that after the service if you want to. But for now we will move on for the sake of time.

In the second scene, throughout the rest of the chapter beginning v. 9, the Apostle John saw the great multitude of people before God’s throne and the Lamb. Their number is so great that it cannot be counted. This is one of the most beautiful pictures in the entire Bible; it is the picture of the saints of God in heaven. It is commonly called the church triumphant. The reason for the adjective “triumphant” is self-explanatory. The scene of God’s people before His throne emanates the sense of triumph. In fact, triumph of God’s people--the saints or their victory over sin and Satan is one of the main themes of the book of Revelation.

What the Apostle John saw in this interlude comforted him. After the horrifying scenes introduced by the first six seals, scenes that could have melted John’s heart like wax in awe and terror, he was now lifted up by what he saw next. The two scenes, of the church militant and the church triumphant, would at any time and place appear beautiful, instilling peace and hope in the hearts of believers. Here in this setting, in sharp contrast to the horrors of suffering and despair and darkness and death depicted by the first six seals, these scenes appear even more beautiful to John and to us.

In the scene of the 144,000, John sees God’s people on earth as they are ready to carry out their mission and thus even enter the valley of the shadow of death. Rev 14:1-5 mention again of 144,000 Christian soldiers, who are ready to march even to the valley of death following the Lamb.Let us open to Rev 14:1-5; let me read them these verses and you can follow along. **“1***Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads.****2****And I heard a sound from heaven like the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder. The sound I heard was like that of harpists playing their harps.****3****And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders. No one could learn the song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth.****4****These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they remained virgins. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among mankind and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb.****5****No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless.*

The 144,000 would follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They are victorious over the beast and its image. They had on their foreheads the seal of the living God, which means that no matter how much God’s people suffer on earth as they fulfill the mission of their Lord, God will protect them in their faith. And when, in the second scene, John sees the church triumphant—all those who are coming out of the great tribulation and suffering. The church militant will suffer and die carrying out the Lord’s mission, but she will not lose faith, for her God will defend her in that faith. The Apostle Paul says in 2Cor 1:10, *“****10****He(God) has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us,”* In the end the church militant will become the church triumphant. Not only is the church sealed and kept in her faith no matter what she suffers, she will soon be elevated and glorified just as the Lord Christ was. Thus God’s people are comforted and full of hope, for God will protect them on earth and soon take them to the glorious company of the saints in heaven. The Apostle John and his readers are now all the more encouraged and emboldened to be about the mission of Christ on earth, so long as God gives us breath and life.

However, the sobering truth about this climax of history is that there is the other side of the story. It is what will happen to those who are not in the church, that is, those who have not washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. Look at 7:13,14. ***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.* Those who are in the church militant and the church triumphant are those who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. They have come out of the great tribulation. What then has happened to those who have not washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb, those who have refused to accept the benefit of what the Lord has prepared for their salvation? They are described in the previous chapter 6:15-17.

***15****Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free, hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains.****16****They called to the mountains and the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!****17****For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?”*

This is the horror of the wrath of God for those who refuse to accept the good news of salvation through the blood of the Lamb. That horror is beyond description of words. The wrath of God is so horrible that only thing they could wish is to die quickly, and so they call to the mountains, *“Fall on us and hide us  from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!*

At the beginning of the message, I told you about the tragedy of 150 plus young people who were crushed and suffocated to death. Why did this happen to them? By no means I mean to tell you that they were more sinful than we are because of the way they suffered and died. Jesus talks about it in Luke 13 in a strikingly similar context. In Luke 13, it was only 18 people who were crushed to death when the tower in in Siloam fell on them. I am sure among those 150 young people who perished were those who had their robes washed in the blood of the Lamb. In God’s sovereign will and purpose, they went to be with the Lord sooner in a manner no one can understand until we see them in heaven again. The family members and friends will grieve over their loss. But that does not change the truth that God is still the God of love and He is good.

However, to those who refuse to have their robes washed with the blood of the Lamb, the eternal destiny is far far worse. To those who are living and will die without being saved through the blood of the lamb, they have not experienced the worst yet no matter how much they have suffered in their lives. The worst is yet to come. But those who have repented their sins and put their trust in the Lord, no matter what joy and happiness they have enjoyed in their lives, they have not experienced the best yet. It is yet to come. You have not seen the best of your life yet.

Sarah and I are now in retirement. That’s a good thing in some ways. But it’s not good in other ways. For example, nothing in our bodies works as it did before. Our physical and mental capacities deteriorate to 75%, 50%, 25%, when time comes, they will function 0%. You know what that means. Our bodies will lie under the ground. This can give us negative perspective on life. What happens to you when you have negative perspective of future? You can become moody and irritable. You can become grumpy old men or women. But believers have different perspective of the future. What is our new perspective of the future? What is coming is better than what was in the past—far better beyond comparison. That’s what the Bible teaches. That’s simple truth of the Bible. I am sure you have seen some good things in life. Yet you have never seen the best yet. The best is yet to come. Future is better than the past, far better beyond comparison.

Try to draw a mental picture of Revelation 7; picture the magnitude of that glory. Let’s read vv. 9-10 again. ***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 before 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.”*

The rest of the chapter 7 is all beautiful portrait of the kingdom of God, the ultimate destiny of believers. It doesn’t require much explanation. Just keep reading it over and over again and draw the picture of heaven.

Imagine the glorious future as portrayed in these verses. Our ability for imagination is too weak. Einstein famously said that imagination is more important than knowledge. I’ve been reading Chronicles of Narnia to my grandson. I am amazed at the power of imagination of CS Lewis, the author. Stretch your imagination. Imagine the glory. The glory of heaven must uplift your soul. I can’t wait to be in heaven and bask in the glory of heaven. Neither can you.

It's the good news—the gospel. It’s the good news of the kingdom of God. But as I said earlier, there is always the other side—the other side of coin, if you will. Good news is the good news for those who trust in the Lord and His finished work on the cross and His resurrection. The other side of the coin is what comes in the future to those who are obstinate and refuse to trust in the Lord and His finished work on the cross.

# The British author Charles Dickens begins his famous book *A tale of two cities* with these words*:* “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.” I love the tone of the words. These words are relevant to us.

If you are in the Lord, the best of times is yet to come for you. But if you are obstinate and refuse to repent your sin and put your trust in the Lord, the same is true with you only in the opposite way; the worst of the times is yet to come to you. I am telling it to myself first before I do to you. We will either live in the best of times or the worst of times depending on our choices in our relation to the Lamb, who shed his precious blood for our sins. If you haven’t made choice to trust in the Lord, this is the time. But you cannot make the right choice with your own will power unless God works in your hearts. You can only plead with God to enable you to make right choices for your life and for your eternal destiny. Amen.

Let’s read key verses vv. 9,10 and pray.