

"Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" That was the question the elder asked of the apostle John in our text from Revelation. It was an astounding, breathtaking spectacle that John was witnessing! Can you picture it in your mind? This scene really serves to spark the imagination! What was it like for John to see all of these believers gathered together from all times and places? What **will** it be like for **us** to see that too, one day? It's exhilarating to think about!

This reading from Revelation 7 reminds me of family reunions from when I was a boy. Does that sound strange? Please, hear me out: You see, I grew up in Central Minneapolis surrounded lots and lots of people, but **not** surrounded by lots and lots of **relatives**. In fact, there were none on my mom's side of the family living in the whole state of Minnesota. Almost all of my uncles, aunts, and cousins, along with my maternal grandparents lived way out west in and around Northern Idaho. My neighborhood friends were always getting to see their cousins and other relatives all year round. That made me kind of envious. So, when summer came and it was time pack my suitcase to go visit my extended family, I was super excited as we got ready to set sail to Idaho in our 1974 Chevy Caprice.

But, once my dad backed that enormously long, boat-of-a-car out of the driveway, it sure took a long time to get to our destination. It was a three-day journey to Idaho, which to me felt like an eternity. Dad always drove at the posted speed limit, and back in those days it was 55 mph, even on the Interstate. But that's what Dad drove, despite my begging for him to go a little faster and of course, repeatedly asking the same question every kid asks their parents, "How long 'till we get there?"

Well, at **long** last we arrived at Grandpa and Grandma's house in Clark Fork, Idaho. Then it was time to spend a few days filled with fun extended-family-get-togethers which included good food, telling stories, looking through photo albums, and finally my favorite: watching 8-millimeter family films which my Grandma had been recording on her little, hand-held video camera over the years. Oh yes, it was 1970 - something, long before VHS or compact disc cameras, and long, **long**

before cell phones! At any rate, “who are all these family members?” I would sometimes wonder as I watched the films, “and from where did they come?” There always seemed to be new ones who I hadn’t met or remembered from the year before, not only on film, but also there in-person at our gatherings. Still, all of this was a hopeful sign to me. I knew that our family spread half-way across the country had a **history**, an ongoing life, and a future. I was **connected** to them even if I didn’t know them all by name.

And **that connection** is how it is with John’s comforting vision from Revelation 7. We actually see **two** family photographs in our text. The first one is a photo from the **past and present** and we see it in verses 2 - 8. The second photo is one from the **future**, which we find in verses 9 -17.

The past and present photograph, in the first half of our reading, shows us the church **militant**. Here on this earth, the Church is at war. Right now, each Christian is in the midst of the tribulations, hardships, and sufferings that John described in Revelation chapter 6. Yes, this family photo album, as we see it being opened up in heaven, is sadly filled with the suffering of the believers in Christ from all times and places. That suffering has come at many times and in various ways at the hands of the “terrible trio” as Martin Luther used to call them: the devil, the world, and our own sinful nature.

And then the very detailed listing of the twelve tribes of Israel, indicates to us that this is **God’s** family, the **full** Israel of God. The promises that God made to Abraham 2000 years before Christ’s birth have now been fulfilled. All those that belong to God from the Old Testament through the New Testament, which includes us, **have been** and **will be** sealed. No one who has trusted in Christ as their Savior from sin and death will be left out of this photo album.

The placing of this protective seal on God’s people, as John describes it in verse 4, marks us as ones who will be delivered from the great, final destructive fire that will come upon the earth on the Last Day. And given the signs that surround us in our world today - persecution of believers, wars, rumors of wars, natural catastrophes, famines, and so on - we realize that God could truly release the devastating winds of His final

judgment at any moment. But, for now, God holds back. Why? Perhaps the apostle Peter says it best: The Lord is “patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). (TLSB, p. 2211). It is vital that we are repentant of our sins and trust in Christ alone for salvation.

How can you know for sure that you are one of those sealed for God’s mighty protection on the Last Day? ‘The sealing that’s described here refers to the ongoing work of the Spirit through **God’s Word and Sacraments** by which the Christian is kept in faith and protected in godly hope through all the tribulations and sufferings and persecutions illustrated by the four horsemen in Revelation chapter 6. What a tremendous comfort for us to know that no matter how dire the dangers become for us, God will not permit His people to be lost’ (Brighton, p. 187).

Yes, what a tremendous comfort to know that the Almighty God, who is ruler of all, is in **control** of His creation **and** in control of the tribulations and judgment coming upon the earth. These hardships and trials that we go through, whatever they may be, will not prevent God from sealing us, that is marking as His own possession. And that happens through the Word and through Baptism. We are God’s dear children and He will care for and protect us, as we cling to Him in faith. In the midst of trial and suffering, we can take comfort that since God has put His seal on us in our Baptism, He will never abandon us. We have a future!

A future. That’s what is depicted in the **second** family photo album as shown in verses 9 - 17. The scene shifts to the church **triumphant**, gathered before the throne of God and the lamb. Here those sealed in the victory sign have been delivered to the Father by the Lamb who is their Shepherd. It is a preview of the **great** family gathering to come. Just think of **your** favorite family get-togethers, but infinitely better!

This family of God has a **future** because God has conquered in the fight and brought His people life and light through His Son’s death and resurrection. So for all eternity there will be this great multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-racial crowd gathered at God’s throne. It is the complete family of believers. They, including you and me, have had their robes washed in the word, and the great Shepherd will lead them to the

fountains of the waters of life. The Word they heard and that permeated their life in the waters of Baptism and the food of the Lord's Supper while part of the 144,000 on earth is now their eternal food and drink under God's heavenly tent. The 144, 000, by the way, is the symbolic number that represents the complete number of all believers of God in Christ, from every time and place.

This photo we see in verses 9 -17 shows us the *future* of God's family. It's a future where the question, "How long 'till we get there?" will never be asked again, because we'll already **be** there! It's a future where there we be no more loss. No more pain. No more hunger. And the hand of God, Himself will wipe away every tear forever!

Whatever your precious family photo album looks like and whatever warm, heartfelt memories you hold of *believing* family and friends from throughout your life, each one of us has a joyful, spectacular, eternal family get-together awaiting us in the presence of God and the Lamb, Jesus! There we will get to know our relatives, our brothers and sisters in Christ from every time and place in the perfect joy and peace of God's presence forever! We have so much to look forward to! Amen!