

**“Visionary Worship”**  
**Revelation 7:9-17**  
**April 29, 2007**  
**By Larry Gaylord**

It's the last book of the bible, and it's the record of a series of visions that came to a man called John in a time of great trial. We call it Revelation; in Greek—*apocalypse*. The very word clues us in: at a time when people of faith were under severe pressure by one of the Roman emperors—Nero, or Domitian, this apocalyptic book foretold the fall of the persecutors of God's people, and the ultimate victory of those who were steadfast. Some of its scenes are horrible—as we read, we recoil from its depictions of hellish violence and suffering. But then there are scenes of hope and healing, such as the one today. It's a powerful portrayal of people at worship—but not just any worship. This is worship in heaven, multitudes from every nation gathered for praise and acclamation at the throne of God. How does such a scene hold hope for people whose situation on earth is so far from it? John's picture of eternal praise to the Lamb was light in the darkness. As people were tortured, driven out, and sent to their deaths, they had this to inspire them. It's visionary worship. And you don't need to be on your way to being devoured by lions to understand the power of that kind of worship. It can lift us up in every kind of challenge that we face. If our lives are becoming centered on Christ just the way these folks are in heaven, we can experience some of their overcoming strength here on earth. So it draws us forward. It's also a pattern for life on earth. There's focus to their lives. First, notice where they had come from—or we might better say—what they had come through. The great tribulation. But now they had put it behind them. Maybe that's easy to do once you're in heaven. The real trick is to put stuff behind us while we're here on earth. In family life, for instance. A lot of folks have a knack for bringing things up that are better off left dead and buried. Sometimes the best way to finish an argument is to drop it, and move on. Don't look back. But what's the theology behind this? God has covered over all our sins, all our past. We don't have to dredge it up. Let it rest in peace. You know the biggest fight my wife and I ever had was shortly after we were married. It was over a really big issue. I was heating up a can of navy beans. And as I heated them, I continually stirred. Well, that's not exactly right: I mashed them, crushing them with a large flat spoon until they formed one big soft lump. I thought that was the way it was supposed to be done. My wife said no, that's not how you do it. Just gently stir—and mostly leave them alone—they'll cook themselves if you give them half a chance. I don't know why, but I really took exception to being told how to cook beans. I should have let it go. But I kept circling, and coming back to it, and trying to show how right I was. You know what they say: when you've dug a whole for yourself, the first step to getting out is, stop digging. In worship we learn to let things go. We get free of having to be right all the time, because the focus shifts, to how good God is. And the power of that worship can carry over into real life: When Christ is the center of our lives, it becomes less and less about me, more and more about God and others. Now if that doesn't carry over into marriage, for instance, well, we're missing something. When we're truly Christ-centered in church, it's going to have an impact on the rest of life. But we need some things to carry it through. We need a supportive group that's going to encourage us in our daily walk. And we need personal practices that will bring us

personally into the presence of God each day—simple times of prayer and a bit of reflection and a Bible passage for the day. Sometimes we say, well, I'm the only one in the relationship that's trying to be Christ-centered. You bear a special burden.

I want to tell you about some folks who had a big fight.

Now we don't live in a Christian bubble. We might strive to create a home environment but that environment is perforated, and porous. Think about life a century and a half ago. Imagine that you have a little house. There it sits. One or two stories with a basement. Notice, there are no lines running into the house. No phone lines, no electricity, no radio—not invented yet—no TV, no computer, no cell phones. There are some books, but these are the books you've chosen to allow in. Maybe a newspaper, and that might represent the strongest outside influence. Your house might be small but it was your castle, and you could determine what came in and what didn't—for better or worse, your children heard your values. And generally speaking those values were reinforced by the larger society. Today it's different. Homes are permeated by the outside.

Now they came through sacrifice. It's an element of faithfulness too often forgotten. They gave their lives. We have smaller sacrifices to make. But they are sacrifices: we give time resources, money. I have a younger friend who loves sports and even loves practice: the harder the better. And when the game is over, there's a great sense of satisfaction from the knowledge that she gave it her all. We don't want to run our course here on earth and then realize, well—I held back. I didn't give it my best shot. Martin Luther King said, "A man (or woman) isn't fully alive until he has found something he's willing to die for." This week we had a mother killdeer here at church. She made her nest among the decorative rocks in the parking lot. When you would approach the nest, she'd flop around on the asphalt, pretending to have a broken wing, in order to distract from her babies-to-be. In other words, she was ready to sacrifice her own life for her children. In a world where peace cries out for supporters, and compassion longs for companions, what will you and I be willing to sacrifice ourselves for?

We don't live in a Christian bubble. We might wish we could—but we don't. The outside world penetrates our homes in a hundred ways. But one thing's for sure—we're better informed about the world and it's needs. From Darfur to the Gulf Coast to the streets of Bloomington-Normal, we are more aware than ever, if we choose to be. Will we be God's responsive people in fulfilling justice and carrying out mission?

Notice something else, too. The people there in heaven had a change of clothes. Before, their clothes were tattered from poverty and hard work, torn from mistreatment, bloodied by their tormentors. Now they are radiant white. The American philosopher Henry David Thoreau said, Don't buy new clothes unless you're ready to change who you are on the inside. Let the clothes represent a new you. The white robes of the worshippers symbolize their victory in overcoming. They had amazing courage because of their experience of the love of God. They gained confidence through Christ. We don't need to live defeated, or downcast. The final scene is thus so significant. "The Lamb at the Center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." Can there be a more tender portrait of the mighty God than that? God: the One who wipes our tears away. There have been a lot of tears shed lately: Blacksburg, Baghdad, the towns of America, where those who were deployed return in a manner that their loved ones had fervently prayed against—tears. Such tears are not easily dried. But we are to be those who help God wipe away

the tears. The activity of worship as described in Revelation becomes the mission of the church. Springs of living water—comfort for those who are forsaken; holding out hope. Let us pray:

Lord, you are the Center. We worship you in all things. Make us your missional people, to offer the light of Christ to all who seek. Amen.