

Whitewash: Revelation 7:9-17

by [Martha Greene](#) in the [October 9, 2002](#) issue

I was in Cuba this summer on a mission trip when our host pastor, Héctor Méndez, approached me, his face grave and drawn. “They have attacked a Presbyterian hospital and school in Pakistan,” he said, “and people have been killed.” The next day our U.S. delegation, along with the congregation in Cuba, prayed for families who had lost loved ones. We pondered the sacrifice of those who had died. It was a jarring reminder that persecution of Christians continues in our world.

The Book of Revelation was written when the Christians of Asia Minor were being persecuted by Roman officials for their refusal to worship the emperors. Some gentile Christians, confronted with persecution and possible death, became martyrs; others weakened and left the faith. Left unchecked, the large number of defections could have resulted in the disappearance of Christianity. In this crisis, the writer of Revelation tried to sharpen the alternatives of worshiping either Caesar or God. We still have to choose.

One often hears how strange it is that the most puzzling and mysterious book of the Bible is called the Book of Revelation. Yet those who are willing to probe its cryptic codes will find words used in worship and in some of the best music ever produced by and for the church. During a time of tribulation, the words from Revelation can be like salve on a wound. The word tribulation means literally “grinding”—derived from the Latin *Tribulum*, which was a threshing sledge for beating the stems and husks of grains. Our lesson today contains words for those who strive to be faithful, but who are ground down by life.

“Who are these clothed in white robes and where have they come from?” one of the elders of heaven asked John. John answered, “You tell me.” The elder said, “They are the ones who have come out of the great tribulation.” Some versions say, “They are the ones who are coming out of the great persecution.” And then a paradoxical image is presented: the blood of persecution has been washed from the robes by the blood of the lamb—and the robes are dazzling white. The baptism of the redeemed is complete. The palm branches signify victory.

“Washed in the blood of the lamb.” The language of substitutionary atonement embarrasses our post-Enlightenment sensibilities. The words conjure images of a revival tent on a hot humid summer night. “The blood of the lamb!” Sweat pours down the preacher’s face, saliva sprays from his mouth. “There is no salvation apart from the blood of the lamb!” Something recoils deep within. And yet, Revelation 7:14 asks us to reconsider. We should be cautious about relinquishing the rich language of biblical metaphor. The therapeutic language of “self-esteem” or “Happiness comes only from within you” will not help us pass through the great tribulation. There are still some things that we cannot do on our own or for ourselves.

We look at the faces of the 144,000. Although a number is given, they are a great multitude from every nation, tribe and color. The redeemed are so numerous they cannot be counted. Who is among them? There is Steven who was stoned and St. Peter who was crucified. There is Oscar Romero with the eucharistic prayer of thanksgiving still issuing from his mouth; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, triumphant over the Nazi gallows; Martin Luther King Jr. still praying that his dream will come true for humanity; Sudanese Christian boys gunned down in their villages by Muslim fanatics. And hospital workers in Pakistan—their robes are the most freshly washed. We see a procession of the faithful lined up in historical order, or maybe not, because order does not matter in the heavenly realm. Will those of whom we know nothing, whose tribulations are private, will they not also be in the great multitude?

This biblical passage speaks powerfully to those of us who face not martyrdom but simply death. Even if we have not been persecuted, we have been beaten enough by the threshing machine of life that the words seem relevant to all of us. Ordinary faces belong to the great multitude: a young girl at Columbine high school; the man who used retirement funds to pay for a mission trip to Haiti to build a house; the corporation accountant who reported the manipulation of numbers; countless others. No wonder the poet Robert Burns could not read this particular passage without weeping.

Arthur McGill, former professor at Harvard Divinity School, observed that death is the great measure of our lives. “So long as parents hear the screeching brakes and react with panic,” he said in a lecture, “they will worship death as the Lord of life.” We often behave as though life on earth is all there is, and I’m not sure it will ever be otherwise. In Revelation 7:9-17, however, death no longer has its grip, nor does hunger, thirst or drought. In this glimpse of heaven, there are no tears.

The heavenly activity of the redeemed is singing and praising God without ceasing. The word worship comes from the word “worthship,” or that act of rendering to God that which God’s worthiness demands. So, worship for the saints is not asking and requesting, as we do in our earthly worship, but simply reflecting on and praising God’s perfection and being. This is our final purpose, our *telos*, the goal of our existence. It is the best worship ever offered, and those of us on earth who check our watches after one hour of worship might take notice.