

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
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John 10:22–30
Revelation 7:9–17

THE ORIGINS OF OUR MUSIC

The Book of Revelation is not a book from which you hear a lot of sermons. At least not if you attend Presbyterian churches on a regular basis. We look at the Book of Revelation and sometimes we have a preconceived notion that it's a harbinger of bad news. It is something of a difficult book to understand. Maybe this is why people—especially those of us in the Presbyterian faith and the traditions that we follow—reserve the right to study this book in a Bible study, a women's circle, or a men's prayer breakfast. We look at it together so we can ask all the questions we have—the imagery is so broad and so strange to our hearing.

The oversimplification of Revelation has led to many misinterpretations and misstatements as to what God is saying. In essence, the abuse of Revelation has led to much theological mischief, and the book is filled with profound and prophetic truths for us. So, how do we break through the complex imagery?

Revelation is a book that is filled with people singing. It is filled with people using music to express their faith. They are either singing about how bad things are or they are singing about God's glory. Today the music is about God being all powerful. It's about God being completely trustworthy. They are singing our song today. God is universally sovereign, and they are celebrating with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in this book—of Revelation.

In essence, here's what's taking place: The apostle John has been banished to an island off the coast of Asia, but on the mainland there are seven churches waiting to receive his word from the Lord. These churches are being persecuted. The believers that go to the churches are experiencing all sorts of trials and all sorts of mistreatment at the hands of the Roman authorities. John speaks as an apostle—as an eyewitness of Jesus—to these people in their time of need. The little island is called Patmos, and we know so little about other details; but we do know that the message that Revelation communicates is not as complicated as many would have you believe.

Simply put, God is greater than any power in the universe. and this powerful God—this all sovereign God—wants to be united with us. This God who can do what no one else can do desires a loving fellowship with us. So now you know. The Book of Revelation isn't that complicated. God is all powerful, and God uses all of his power to love us.

Now, I'm guessing none of us before today would have come up with a simplified understanding of the Book of Revelation that could be put in one sentence. God is all powerful and God loves us. God works constantly for our benefit. God overcomes the evil that is within us and the evil that we perpetuate against one another. God works on our

behalf—our suffering, our pain, our thirst, our tears are all ultimately banished by God's eternal and powerful rule.

John says that Jesus is the evidence of what God is doing now and what God will do for us and with us in the future. If you turn in your hymnal to hymn number 364, *I Sing a Song of the Saints of God*, you will see there some words that describe part of what God is accomplishing. The second verse says, "They love their Lord so dear, so dear ..." This is a fun hymn. We're not singing it today, but when we sing it you can't help but smile. When we sing this hymn, it answers that question that was posed for us, "Who are those robed in white and where have they come from?" Why, these are the saints of God, the song says.

Lesbia Scott wrote the lyrics to this hymn. "They loved the Lord so dear, so dear..." She understood there was the desire in God's heart to be devoted in connection to us. Often Mrs. Scott's music contains this same message. Interestingly enough, she didn't write her hymns with the intention of publishing them. In fact, originally she wrote her hymns for her three children. It was during the 1920s that her children would ask their mother to make up a hymn for them to sing at a picnic, or to sing a hymn for a foggy day. I wonder what kind of a response I would have received if I had come in today and said, "Melvin, sing a hymn for a rainy day that would have worked for us."

Mrs. Scott was married to a naval officer who became an Anglican priest. She was highly educated; she attended Ravenscroft School in Sussex. She lived until fairly recently, only dying in 1986. But for her, music was an expression of her faith. Our lives are, in the same way, the music of our faith—expressions of what we believe. And if we were to make a hymn about our beloved Bush Hill Presbyterian Church, I believe people would hear that God loves them and cares for them.

I believe people would know that this love is more powerful than any problem they face. I think we would always sing about Christ first and the perfect sacrifice he made for our sin, and we only reflect that devotion in what we say and do with one another. If the essence of our fellowship became lyrical, I believe it would encourage the world to resist the pressure that so much of our culture places on us—pressure to succeed, pressure to, in essence, worship ourselves. It's true that nothing is stronger than God's love. But it also is true that this love is strong enough to let us walk away. We all know what it feels like during those times when we've turned our back on what we believe and followed short-term gain or self-gratification.

So I want you to go home today and I want you to sing *I Sing a Song of the Saints of God* in a way in which you let God bring you back. Our lives are only complete—only fulfilled—when we are brought back to the security and the peace that Christ offers. And so, if we live and sing God's love for us, we will learn to live and sing God's love for all creation. And then we will know again the work of Jesus Christ in our midst. I encourage you to take a lesson from Mrs. Scott—a mother singing her faith to her children, and sharing it still with us today.

Amen.