The Multitude No One Could Number

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On Hebrews 11–12, the Tent-Dwellers Who Were Looking for a City, the Four Horsemen of Revelation 6, and the Reversal That Praise Is the Final Sound

The Final Sound

Every song we sang together this morning resonated with where my heart has been for the past several months. And the resonance was around a single central question, a question I think every honest Christian has wrestled with at some point.

Do we actually believe what the songs say? When we sing that every nation will come to worship, that praise is the ultimate sound humanity will make, that faithfulness will spread to every tribe and tongue across the whole earth, do we actually believe that, or are we singing words we cannot quite reconcile with what we see when we look at the actual world around us?

It is hard to believe that the final sound humanity will make will be the sound of praise. It is hard to believe that the final sound will not be one last gurgle of suffering and death, but rather the cacophony-becoming-harmony of every language of every people offering praise to the One who made them. We live in a country founded on life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and within five minutes of watching a debate between people who supposedly believe the same things, you would think they were mortal enemies. The division within communities that ought to be unified, the alienation within institutions that ought to be cohesive, the cancellation of

people for the smallest deviation from the prevailing social pressures, all of it makes the song of every-nation-praising-together feel like wishful thinking rather than prophetic reality.

Do not put your confidence in the political schemes of man. Do not put your confidence in the economic schemes of man. Those schemes cannot build the city of God we are looking for. And anyone who tells you otherwise is selling you a counterfeit.

Where Sin Abounds, Grace Much More Abounds

And let me be honest about how my own view of this changed. For years, when I read the book of Revelation, I read the 144,000 as a literal small number of faithful survivors. “All right. That is about it. The final remnant. Everyone else has fallen away. It will come down to a tiny faithful minority, and that will be the conclusion of the divine project.”

And then, years ago, a brother in our assembly presented some thoughts on Romans 5 that genuinely reoriented my reading of the divine math. When you start to read Romans 5:12 forward (“by one man’s sin entered into the world, and death by sin”) and then track Paul’s argument through the chapter to Romans 5:20 (“where sin abounded, grace did much more abound”) you begin to realize that the divine accounting is more generous than the small-remnant reading had allowed for.

> Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men . . . For if by the one man’s offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many . . . Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 5:12, 15, 20–21)

Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more. The math is not balanced. The math is asymmetric. Wherever sin has reached its furthest extent, grace has reached even further. There is no place sin has penetrated that grace has not penetrated more deeply. And once that pattern lodges in your reading, the small-remnant interpretation of Revelation starts to look like an under-reading of what the New Testament is actually claiming.

People who appear to be far away, strangers from the commonwealth of God's promises, those are the very people who, by the Romans 5 pattern, the grace of God has reached more deeply than the surrounding visible evidence suggests. We ourselves were once those strangers. We ourselves heard the voice of God and responded. And the gracious mechanism that brought us in is the same mechanism still operating in the lives of people who, on present observation, look entirely outside the kingdom.

Never get fixated on what you presently see. What you see right now does not tell the whole story.

Faith Is the Substance

We have been covering chapters of Hebrews on Wednesday evenings, and the framework of the eleventh chapter gives us the operating definition we need:

"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good testimony" (Hebrews 11:1–2).

Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. There are realities that have substance, actual weight and structure and presence, that are nevertheless invisible to ordinary observation. And faith is the apparatus through which we engage with those substantive-but-invisible realities. Not pretending the visible is unreal. Not denying what is

observable. But seeing through and past the observable into the larger structure that the observable is sitting inside of.

And the eleventh chapter of Hebrews names person after person (Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, the prophets) but the figure the writer of Hebrews spends the most time on, by a wide margin, is Abraham. Abraham is the prototype. The pilgrim-faith pattern that the rest of the chapter develops is essentially the Abraham pattern repeated in many subsequent lives.

Why Would Abraham Leave Ur?

Here is what we have to understand about Abraham's call. He was living in Ur of the Chaldees: the great metropolitan civilization of his moment, roughly 4,500 years ago. If you want to think of an early-civilization equivalent of New York or Los Angeles, Ur was it. It was flooded annually by the Euphrates, producing rich farmland and vegetation, great trees lining the rivers, a thriving urban population, and the cultural sophistication of the most advanced human collective then operating on the planet.

And there is a theologian who once visited the modern remains of Ur and photographed the surrounding landscape from the four cardinal directions. Facing north, nondescript scrub-brush desert as far as the eye could see. Facing south: the same. East, the same. West, the same. And the photograph series captures the geographical implausibility of Abraham's call. From any position at the edge of Ur, you could not visually see the land God was directing him toward. The land was beyond the horizon of human visibility. The only access to it was the call itself, the voice of God describing a place Abraham could not yet see and asking him to start walking in its direction anyway.

Why would Abraham leave the thriving civilization for a desert he could not see across? Because he heard the call. And the call carried, within itself, enough authority to override the visible evidence that staying in Ur would be the smarter choice. And so he walked. Oasis to oasis. Across the desert. Toward a promise the geography did not yet confirm. And the rest of his life, and the lives of Isaac and Jacob after him, was spent as a tent-dweller in the very land God had promised.

> By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. (Hebrews 11:8–10)

Dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise. Three generations of tent-dwellers in the land God had promised them. They had arrived at the destination, and yet they continued to live as if they had not arrived. Why? Because the city they were actually looking for had not yet been built (not by them, not by anyone they could see) and they refused to settle for the unimproved geography of the present age when the actual city, whose builder and maker was God, was still under construction.

And the tent-dwelling life of Abraham stands in contrast to the choice made by his nephew Lot, who pitched his tent toward Sodom (Genesis 13:12). Pitching toward Sodom is the diagnostic. Lot did not initially move into Sodom. He just oriented his tent in that direction. And by the next time we encounter Lot in the narrative, he is no longer at the edge of Sodom. He is inside the city, seated at the gate as one of its officials (Genesis 19:1). The orientation toward

Sodom was the slow-motion movement into Sodom. The pitching-toward-the-city was the first step on the road to becoming a citizen of it.

Embrace Your Foreignness

And Abraham's life in the land of promise was, as Hebrews 11:9 puts it, the life of a foreign-country resident: a paroikos in the Greek, a sojourner-as-resident-alien in the modern equivalent. He never assimilated into the surrounding Canaanite culture. He did not adopt their religious practices. He did not pretend his theological convictions were merely private hobbies. He remained, visibly and audibly, a stranger.

And yet at the same time, he was a blessing to the surrounding population. When the four kings from the east, led by Chedorlaomer, swept down and took Sodom and the cities of the plain captive, including Lot, Abraham immediately mounted a rescue operation. He pursued the invading army, defeated them by night, and recovered every captive along with all the plundered goods. And when the king of Sodom offered Abraham the spoils as compensation, Abraham refused. He took nothing.

> Then the king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give me the persons, and take the goods for yourself." But Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have raised my hand to the Lord, God Most High, the Possessor of heaven and earth, that I will take nothing, from a thread to a sandal strap, and that I will not take anything that is yours, lest you should say, 'I have made Abram rich.'" (Genesis 14:21–23)

That is the blessing Abraham was bringing to the surrounding nations even while remaining a foreigner among them. Rescue without exploitation. Service without extraction. The blessing of a stranger who has resources and is willing to deploy them on behalf of the local population without converting the deployment into permanent leverage over them.

And the writer of Hebrews observes that Abraham's tent-dwelling foreignness was sustained by his orientation toward a city he had not yet seen:

> These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them. (Hebrews 11:13–16)

Strangers and pilgrims on the earth. That is the chosen self-description of the great cloud of witnesses Hebrews 11 is naming. They embraced their foreignness. They refused to assimilate. And the surrounding population could tell (by their speech, by their habits, by their refusal to participate in the local religious practices, by every observable marker of cultural location) that these people were not from around here. And the writer of Hebrews names what they were doing: They were declaring, by the very visibility of their foreignness, that they were citizens of another country and that they were waiting for the homeland that other country represented.

Apart From Us They Could Not Be Made Perfect

And here is one of the most stunning observations in Hebrews 11. Listen to verse 39 and 40:

"And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us" (Hebrews 11:39–40).

They did not receive the promise. They lived in faith. They died in faith. And the actual delivery of the promise was deferred until something better had been prepared: something better that involves us, the post-Christ believers, as essential participants.

Had salvation been available under the Mosaic law, Christ would not have needed to come. Had salvation been available prior to Moses, Christ would not have needed to come. Had the prophets been able to deliver the ultimate salvation, Christ would not have needed to come and offer his life on the cross. The entire scaffolding of Old Testament faith (Abraham, Moses, David, the prophets, the great cloud of witnesses) was leading toward something that none of them individually could deliver. And the thing it was leading toward turned out to be the death and resurrection of the Messiah, applied through the Spirit to the multinational community now being gathered out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

Apart from us, they could not be made perfect. Our participation in the Christ-event is part of what completes the unfinished work the Old Testament saints were waiting for. They are now waiting on us, and on those who come after us, to fully realize the city they were already seeing in advance.

Do Not Draw Back

And the practical implication of all this, for the original audience of Hebrews, was direct. The Hebrew Christians had previously suffered the confiscation of their goods. They had been ridiculed, harassed, and dispossessed. And the writer of Hebrews remembers this in chapter 10:

> But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your

> goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven. (Hebrews 10:32–34)

They had previously taken the dispossession with joy because they knew they had a better, enduring possession in heaven. But now, at the time of the writing of Hebrews, they were facing a fresh round of difficulty, and the temptation was to retreat. To go back to Judaism. To distance themselves from the costly Christian identification. To pull back into the safer religious identity that the surrounding culture would tolerate without harassment.

And the writer of Hebrews names the temptation directly:

> Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul. (Hebrews 10:38–39)

Do not draw back. The visible safety of the surrounding cultural compromise is not actually safer than the visible risk of continued Christian identification. The peace of compromise is not to be compared with the peace that comes in the life that is to come, in the ultimate promise God has made to all of us.

And there are many safe places in this world. Political safety, find the right party and align with it. Economic safety, accumulate enough resources that you do not have to depend on anyone. Social safety: say the right things on social media, repeat the prevailing slogans, never deviate from the surrounding cultural consensus. Religious safety: put the right statement of faith on your church website, hit the right keywords, signal to the surrounding theological constituency that you are one of them. Every one of these safeties is available. And every one of them costs the same thing: your foreignness. Your willingness to remain a tent-dweller in the surrounding land. And whatever crowd you placate by your safety-seeking, you alienate the

crowd on the opposite side. There is no neutral position. The safety you buy with cultural compromise is purchased at the cost of the foreignness God has called you to maintain.

So Great a Cloud of Witnesses

> And the twelfth chapter of Hebrews opens with the consequence of the eleventh:
>
> Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. (Hebrews 12:1–2)

A cloud of witnesses. The great stadium of Hebrews 11 saints is, by Hebrews 12, populated around us as witnesses to the race we are presently running. They have completed their portion of the relay. They are watching ours. And I cannot read Hebrews 12:1 without thinking of my grandmother Dolores, whose distinctive singing voice was, by any conventional measurement, not the most polished voice on the planet, but whose fierce, soul-piercing intensity made her one of the most consequential singers I have ever heard. She would sing: “Shouting, come on! You can make it if you try!,” and the singing was not casual. The singing was a battle-cry. The singing was the cloud-of-witnesses message delivered through one specific human voice into the surrounding room.

And when I imagine the great cloud of witnesses now, I imagine a stadium full of every Abraham, every Isaac, every Jacob, every David, every Barak, every Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, every unsung hero of the faith whose name never made the canonical list, and behind them, the layers of subsequent witnesses, including grandmother Dolores and every other faithful saint whose example has been deposited into the assembly’s memory. And the cloud is saying to us, in unison: “Come on! You can make it if you try! Be the heroes we need you to be in this

world. You have the kingdom. You have met the King. The salvation is yours. The resurrection is ours, too. Come on. You can make it if you try."

This Is the Black Horse

And I want to tell you about a dream (or a half-dream, or whatever it was) that woke me at four-thirty this morning. I had been spending the previous evening reading through Hebrews 11 and Hebrews 12 in preparation for this Sunday's message, thinking about the city that has foundations, thinking about the great cloud of witnesses, thinking about the pilgrim-stranger pattern.

And I went to bed with all of that pressing on my interior. Then sometime around four-thirty, I woke up. The last words I heard before waking, and I do not know if they came from inside me or from elsewhere, were these: "This is the black horse." And I lay there staring at the ceiling for a long time, unable to go back to sleep, with that phrase running through my interior.

The black horse is the third of the four horsemen of Revelation 6. Johnny Cash, in his haunting song "When the Man Comes Around," which is essentially Revelation 6 set to music, names them in sequence. And the four horsemen are probably the most well-known portion of the book of Revelation in the surrounding culture. We have even given the name "the Four Horsemen" to the defensive backfields of certain football teams, because the horsemen evoke the image of judgment-bringers descending on the opposition.

But look at the actual sequence in Revelation 6:

> Now I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals; and I heard one of the four living creatures saying with a voice like thunder, "Come and see." And I looked, and behold, a white horse. He who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer. (Revelation 6:1–2)

The white horse, the rider going forth conquering and to conquer. This is, I think, Christ himself doing what Christ is presently doing across the surrounding world. Not at some distant future point but now. The white-horse rider is the ongoing gospel-conquest that is happening across the present age.

And then the red horse, war and the division that war produces. The black horse: famine, the consequence of war's disruption of food supply. The pale horse: death, the consequence of war and famine working their way through populations. The sequence is causal. War interrupts agriculture and produces famine. Famine weakens immune systems and produces pestilence. The cumulative result is mass death. And the same sequence appears in Leviticus 26 as the consequence of broken covenant, and in Ezekiel 14, and across the Old Testament prophetic literature.

And the people who suffer most under the four horsemen are not, by Old Testament pattern, the powerful and unrighteous. The powerful and unrighteous tend to be the ones who launched the wars in the first place. The ones who suffer are the ordinary populations: the righteous along with the unrighteous, the children, the elderly, the small communities caught in the path of conflicts they did not start. That is why the fifth seal does not feature the rich and powerful crying out for vindication. It features the martyrs.

The Altar Beneath the Throne

> When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" Then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of

> their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed. (Revelation 6:9–11)

The souls under the altar. And the altar is, by the broader Revelation imagery, the golden altar of incense, the place where the prayers of the saints rise as incense before the throne (Revelation 8:3-4). The martyred saints are crying out from underneath the altar, and what they are crying out is not vengeance for personal injury, but the just question of when the broader injustice will be addressed. “How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood?” And the answer they receive is the gift of white robes and a charge to rest a little while longer, until their number is completed. The number of fellow-servants who will join them in martyrdom is not yet complete. The promise is not the suppression of the question but the completion of the company.

And then the sixth seal:

> And the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains, and said to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?” (Revelation 6:15–17)

The wrath of the Lamb. That phrase is, when you let it sit, theologically arresting. God is not pleased with humanity’s abuse of humanity. They are all his children. And when his children begin to abuse one another, he is not indifferent. But notice the agency in the description: the kings of the earth, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty, alongside the slaves and the free, are crying for the mountains to fall on them. The cosmic-scale catastrophe Revelation 6 is describing is, in significant part, humanity’s own self-destruction reaching its terminal stage. The

wrath of the Lamb is, on careful inspection, the cumulative result of humanity's wrath against humanity finally exposed by the divine spotlight.

And the chapter closes with the question: "Who is able to stand?" That is the question. And the question reads, at first appearance, as if the answer might be "no one." Visually, when we look around at the surrounding world right now (at the division, the alienation, the suicide rates at historic highs, the overdose rates at historic highs, the institutional collapse, the spiritual exhaustion) the answer feels like "no one will be able to stand." Maybe the small remnant of 144,000 sitting quaking in a corner somewhere will be able to stand. And the rest of humanity will perish under the cumulative weight of the four horsemen. That is the implicit reading. And it is the reading I myself operated on for many years.

What John Heard, What John Saw

But the seventh chapter of Revelation opens with one of the most stunning reversals in the entire book. And the reversal is the same hermeneutical pattern we have already encountered with the lion and the lamb in Revelation 5.

In Revelation 5, John weeps because no one is found worthy to open the scroll. And one of the elders says to him:

> "Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals." And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain . . . (Revelation 5:5–6)

John hears about the conquering Lion. He turns to look and sees the slain Lamb. Same figure. Two different angles of vision. The power of the Lion is being manifested through the suffering of the Lamb. What John hears and what John sees are not opposites; they are the same

reality viewed from two different perspectives, and the visual perspective is the one that reveals how the auditory promise is actually being fulfilled.

And the same hermeneutical pattern occurs in Revelation 7. Listen carefully:

"Then I heard the number of those who were sealed. One hundred and forty-four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel were sealed" (Revelation 7:4).

John hears the number. One hundred and forty-four thousand from the twelve tribes of Israel, twelve thousand from each. That is the auditory revelation. The small, organized, military-roster-style number that suggests a disciplined remnant of faithful Israelite servants.

And then John turns and looks. Watch what he sees:

> After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands . . . (Revelation 7:9)

A great multitude which no one could number. John heard the small organized number. He turned and saw the innumerable multinational throng. Same accounting. Two different angles of vision. The 144,000 he heard is the same company as the multitude he saw, but the multitude is so much larger than the auditory number could suggest that no one could number it.

This is the divine accounting in full display. The Romans 5 pattern (where sin abounded, grace abounded much more) is here in apocalyptic visualization. Wherever the surrounding observation suggests a small remnant, the actual divine count is an innumerable multitude. Wherever the auditory promise sounds limited, the visual reality is unlimited. The great multitude no one could number is the actual harvest of the great cloud of witnesses' faithfulness across all the centuries leading up to this moment.

Tribulation as the Marking

And how did the great multitude come to be standing before the throne? Listen to the answer the elder gives:

> And one of the elders answered, saying to me, "Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?" And I said to him, "Sir, you know." So he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." (Revelation 7:13–14)

These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation. The white robes are not the absence of suffering. The white robes are the consequence of having passed through suffering with faithfulness. And the cleansing agent is not the suffering itself, the cleansing agent is the blood of the Lamb. The suffering is the medium through which the cleansing has been applied; the cleansing has been applied because the saints suffered with the Lamb's pattern operating in them.

And the witness to the surrounding world is precisely this. When we suffer at the hands of the ungodly and respond with grace rather than with retaliation, the surrounding world sees, with reluctant clarity, that something is operating in us that does not operate in them. That is the conversion-mechanism Christ modeled on the cross. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). And the Roman centurion at the foot of the cross watched the suffering, saw the response, and said, "Truly this was the Son of God" (Matthew 27:54).

The conversion of the surrounding world comes through the faithfully suffering presence of the people of God within the surrounding world. Not through political victory. Not through economic dominance. Not through cultural enforcement. Through faithful suffering that demonstrates what kind of love is actually available from the One who has called us into his

kingdom. Take up your cross and follow me, Jesus said (Matthew 16:24). The cross is the conversion-instrument. The cross is the multitude-generating apparatus that turns auditory 144,000s into innumerable visual multitudes.

The Mark That Lets You Stand

Now go back to Revelation 6:17, "who is able to stand?" And then to Revelation 7:1-3: the answer:

> After these things I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, on the sea, or on any tree. Then I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God. And he cried with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, saying, "Do not harm the earth, the sea, or the trees till we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads." (Revelation 7:1–3)

The sealing of the servants of God on their foreheads is the answer to the "who is able to stand?" question. The angel comes through and marks every servant of God with the divine seal that lets that servant stand through whatever the surrounding tribulation brings. And the mark is given before the surrounding judgment is released. The protection precedes the trial. The Father has not left his servants exposed to be ground up by the four horsemen; he has commissioned the marking-angel to identify them and seal them in advance.

That mark will be different for different nations and different situations. The form of faithful suffering you are called to may not be the form your brother across the world is called to. But the marking is the same. And what you are called to stand through, you will stand through, because the divine seal has been applied to you by the angel commissioned to do exactly that

work. Not by your own strength. Not by your own resourcefulness. By the mark applied by the angel sent to apply it.

The City Coming Down

And the book of Revelation closes with the bride-city descending from heaven:

"Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Revelation 21:2).

The bride-city descending. And the same city Abraham was looking for in Hebrews 11:10 ("the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God") is the city that finally arrives in Revelation 21. The city Abraham died without entering is the city we are now part of, anticipated in advance and waiting to be fully consummated. The same Jerusalem that descended out of heaven in John's vision is the Jerusalem that the Hebrews 11 saints had been waiting for across all the centuries of their tent-dwelling foreignness.

And the city brings with it the consummate divine response to every injustice we have prayed about:

"And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

Every tear wiped away. The injustices we have been praying about for years: addressed. The children we have lost: recovered. The relationships we have grieved: restored. The hopes deferred: fulfilled. The resurrection of the dead is the hope underneath every Christian conviction. Paul, in the book of Acts, repeatedly says, "It is for the hope of the resurrection of the dead that I am called into question this day" (Acts 23:6). The resurrection is the engine of

Christian hope. And the resurrection is for the lost, the hurting, the gone-astray, those we think have gone beyond the pale of recovery.

No. The dead, both small and great, will stand before the throne of God (Revelation 20:12). And the standing is not principally to receive the riot-act and be dismissed. The standing is to behold the face of the One who has loved them across their entire existence and who is now offering the consummate recovery to every soul willing to receive it. Only the most stubborn will refuse it. And we are not in a position to judge in advance who will refuse and who will receive. The Father's accounting is more generous than ours has been. And the surprise at the consummation will be on the side of expanded mercy rather than on the side of narrowed exclusion.

Scales on My Eyes

And let me close honestly. Most of the time, when the Lord drops something in my heart, what he is dropping is something I myself need to hear. I am not naming any of this because I think you have a problem with your vision and your faith.

I am naming this because I feel like God is saying to me: "Rob, you have scales on your eyes. And I am asking you to let me remove them." I do not want to fear. I do not want to hold on to the certainties of this present age: the political certainties, the economic certainties, the social certainties that promise safety in exchange for compromise. I want to hold on to the certainties of the promise of God. The certainty that the great multitude no one could number is real, even when what I hear and see on the surrounding evidence suggests otherwise. The certainty that praise is going to be the final sound, even when the present noise of suffering and division threatens to drown out every previous hope.

Increase my faith, Lord. Help me to be who you have called me to be. I do not want to settle for the unimproved geography of the present age when the actual city, whose builder and maker is God, is still descending toward us. I want to keep walking, oasis to oasis, like Abraham across the desert, toward the promise the geography does not yet confirm. And I want to keep singing, alongside grandmother Dolores and the great cloud of witnesses whose voices have been deposited in our memory, “Shouting, come on. You can make it if you try.”

Praise is going to be the final sound. No matter what we are walking through right now. The angel of the Lord has marked us. We will be able to stand. And the great multitude no one could number is being gathered, even now, in the divine accounting that is more generous than the surrounding evidence has yet revealed. Amen.