

WASHED IN THE BLOOD

Revelation 7:9-17

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, February 3, 2013

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands (Rev. 7:9).

Charles Dickens' novel *A Christmas Story* tells of Ebenezer Scrooge, a miserly man who cared more about money than people. Scrooge is visited by a succession of benevolent ghosts, who take him on a mystic tour of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Future. Through these visions, Scrooge comes to a new understanding of his life and is changed from an unhappy, unpopular bully to a joyful and beloved benefactor.

The vision that concludes Revelation 7 has a similar intention for the churches to which John was writing. Under the anxiety of impending persecution and other earthly trials, they are shown a vision of what they really are in the sight of God and of the glorious future assured for them in Christ. The logic is that if the Christians could only see themselves in terms of their heavenly destiny, they would find strength to prevail in the contest of faith in this world. As Christians today read and study Revelation, living in the same world as the early believers did, we are also intended to look on ourselves from the perspective of our heavenly identity and destination so that we will stand firm in faith. Douglas Kelly writes: "This passage, as well as any in the Word of God, puts our minds on heaven, where many of our loved ones already are and where all who are saved will soon be."¹

¹ Douglas F. Kelly, *Revelation*, Mentor Expository Commentary (Ross-shire, Scotland: 2012), 149.

WHO ARE THESE: OUR DESTINY

We have an expression, “Lo, and behold!” for a remarkable sight that comes before us. I remember stepping up to the rim of the Grand Canyon when I was a boy, or more recently my first sight of Niagara Falls, being almost overwhelmed by the scenic majesty before my eyes. The apostle John had this kind of experience, turning to see not a landscape but a vision of the glorified church in heaven: “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands” (Rev. 7:9). We saw in our study of verses 4-8 that this great multitude is the heavenly counterpart to the 144,000 sealed servants on earth, which depicted the whole and complete church that is protected by God through trials. Like Ebenezer Scrooge’s Ghost of Christmas Present, this vision informs believers of what they are: a multitude too great to number, standing before God’s throne.

It is tempting for Christians to see themselves as an insignificant minority, unable to tip the scales of politics or world affairs. We can become despondent the way that Elijah did when he complained to God that he was the only true believer left in Israel. The Lord informed him that there were actually 7000 who had not bowed to the idols (1 Ki. 19:14, 18). Christians are never a tiny, insignificant group but are always part of a vast host who will be elevated to positions of highest honor in heaven when history is completed.

Not only is the church a vast host but it reflects all the diversity that is seen in the entire earth: “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Rev. 7:9). The church is never an ingrown ethnic or cultural enclave but is an exciting assembly of believers from every group of humanity. We are reminded of God’s promise to Abraham at the beginning of the covenant of grace: “I will make of you a great nation..., and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:2-3). The multitudes of John’s vision are thus “the consummate fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise.”² Kevin DeYoung

² G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 426-7.

writes: “There are going to be millions of Africans in that great multitude and plenty of Brazilians and Chinese and Filipinos, and lots of Mexicans and Indians and Arabs, and there will be some white people too... Heaven will be diversity without the political correctness and multi-culturalism unified in one single purpose. Every heart, every head, every voice giving glory to God and to the Lamb.”³

Here the nations find the true peace that had eluded them on earth through the person and work of Christ (Eph. 2:14). The division of the nations caused by sin at the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11) has now been reversed in the church as it gathers believers from all over the earth in one creed and a shared salvation. It can often be difficult in our present world for the church to overcome barriers of race, culture, and language, but in heaven there will be true unity with the full diversity of the human race, every tongue joined in giving praise to Christ. Seeing this now should encourage churches to reach out across racial and cultural barriers, knowing that someday all Christians will be fully one.

The church is revealed not only in its vastness and diversity but especially in the victory it has received through Jesus Christ. This is the point of the white robes in which the saints are clothed, and the palm branches in their hands. Like conquerors receiving their triumphal parade, the saints above wear white robes and bear the palm branches of victory, attained through their union with Christ.

White also stands for purity and the believer’s justification through faith in Christ. Jesus wrote to the church in Sardis, saying that the “one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life” (Rev. 3:5). The great victory over sin was won by Christ through his perfect life and sin-atonement death. Through faith we receive the victory of justification and its reward of everlasting life. Philip Hughes writes: “this is the apparel of Christ’s bride, the church triumphant, sanctified by him and cleansed from all defilement.”⁴ Although they suffered greatly in the world, some even suffering death for their faith, every Christian experiences triumph in salvation. John wrote in his first letter: “this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith” (1 Jn. 5:4).

³ Kevin DeYoung, “A Great Multitude and a Great Hope,” <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/page/2> accessed on-line 2/3/13.

⁴ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of Revelation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 96.

The white robed multitude in heaven is occupied in the praise of God for their salvation: they are “crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” (Rev. 7:10). The church above is centered on the sovereign grace of God and the saving work of Jesus Christ on the cross! This is what Christians should be excited about now as well, while still suffering the trials of earth. People become delirious over a football victory, a political rally, or a musical concert. But here are greater themes and a far greater victory! By ascribing salvation to God, they claim that he deserves all the praise for delivering us through the tribulation of this world. Salvation relies on God’s grace and rests on the finished work of Christ and therefore the glory belongs to them. After the Red Sea crossing, Moses sang, “The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation” (Ex. 15:2). Knowing that we will worship this way when we have passed through to heaven, believers now are urged to give God the same praise while still on earth.

Not only does the church give praise to God for salvation, but the angelic host gathered around responds with their own adoration: “And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, ‘Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen’” (Rev. 7:11-12).

When we were studying the scene of God’s throne room in chapter 4, we noted that the twenty four elders were probably angelic counterparts to the church, since they are seen in this passage worshiping with all the angels of heaven in response to the praise of the church. The angels begin by affirming what the church has declared: “Amen!” they cry to God’s saving work. This is the great “Amen!” to acclaim the assembly of the entire vast multitude of redeemed sinners in heaven, launching the angels in giving praise for God’s attributes as they are glorified in our salvation: “Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever!” God has bestowed blessing, displayed glory, exercised wisdom, earned thanksgiving and honor, and wielded power and might in saving his people from the guilt of sin and the tribulation of this world. All eternity will echo with praise

like this because God has once and for all proved his grace to his people and won their hearts for praise.

This raises the question as to whether the angels watching our lives today see reasons to praise God. For that matter, we should ask if other people are moved to praise God for us. They should be, since God's Spirit is at work in us to bear the fruit of salvation. Jesus said that "there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Lk. 15:10). So be encouraged as you follow the leading of God's Word and as, step-by-step, you make progress in the Christian life, that the angels are praising the wisdom and power of God that is displayed in saving you from sin. Moreover, as you embrace a biblical lifestyle and more boldly spread the good news of salvation, other people will give thanks to God for the salvation he has brought through your life. Robert Mounce writes: "How unbelievably great will be the joyful adoration of the heavenly host when *all* the redeemed stand before their God!"⁵ If you can see yourself in this throng, and you can through faith in Jesus Christ, doesn't the hope of glory strengthen you for the trials of your life?

HOW DID THEY GET THERE: OUR DELIVERANCE

As so often happens in Revelation, John's vision becomes more animated as one of the worshiping elders turns to ask him a question. Just as the ghosts of Dickens' *A Christmas Story* engaged with Ebenezer Scrooge to ensure he got the point, this angelic leader probes John's understanding. "Who are these," he asks, "clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" John wisely gave the angel the floor: "I said to him, 'Sir, you know.'" The elder answered: "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev. 7:13-14). At first, John's vision was intended to show the suffering Christians of earth who they are as the glorified church of Christ. Now, the elder wants to make clear how the church got there, highlighting the great deliverance achieved through Jesus.

The elder makes two points for John and his readers to emphasize. First, the church arrives in heaven having "come out of the great tribulation" (Rev. 7:14). Christians on earth should realize that trials

⁵ Robert H. Mounce, *Revelation (Revised)*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), PG.

and persecutions are likely to occur and that we will be saved only by persevering in faith against all opposition. Peter exhorted: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed” (1 Pet. 4:12-13).

The elder’s statement raises a question as to when this tribulation takes place. In Jesus’ end-times teaching, he stated that shortly before his return “there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved” (Mt. 24:21-22; see also Dan. 9:24-27). Revelation 13 depicts the rise of the Antichrist and his beasts “to make war on the saints and to conquer them” (Rev. 13:7). Paul wrote of a great apostasy within the church before the end (2 Thess. 2:3). Given this background, and since verse 14 speaks of *the* great tribulation, some scholars conclude that the elder refers to a final, relatively brief period of extraordinary trials through which these glorified saints will come.

There are good reasons, however, to hold that the elder is referring more generally to the entirety of the church age as it is characterized by persecution, opposition, and affliction. Under this view, *the* tribulation is the general hatred displayed towards Christ and his people in this world, which will be especially concentrated just before the end. “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own,” Jesus said; “but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (Jn. 15:19). This general idea of tribulation is more likely because John’s vision incorporates the entirety of the church as a great multitude of the church of all ages and not merely the subset of those saved in the final time of particularly strong persecution.

The book of Revelation urges the churches of John’s time to brace for tribulation. John called himself “your brother and partner in the tribulation” (Rev. 1:9). All through history, believers in Christ have suffered the grossest afflictions for the gospel, yet have prevailed because God sealed them for salvation and empowered them by his Spirit to hold fast in faith. Faithful servants of Christ were thrown to the lions in John’s day, were burned at the stake in the English Reformation, were hunted through the countryside during the

persecutions of Scotland, and more recently have been bombed during their worship services in Sudan and Nigeria. Steve Wilmshurst writes: “It would be difficult to tell a Christian in China, Iraq, or North Korea today that the tribulation has not yet started!”⁶ As Jesus told his disciples: “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (Jn. 16:33).

Those who wish to bear the name of Jesus in this world must reckon on tribulation of the worst kind. They also can know, as this vision shows us, that through Christ they will emerge out of the tribulation into the glorious assembly of heaven in the presence of God’s throne. Heinrich Schenk wrote a hymn that asks the elder’s question, “Who are these of dazzling brightness, these in God’s own truth arrayed / clad in robes of purest whiteness, robes whose luster ne’er shall fade?” He answers: “These are they who have contended for their Savior’s honor long / wrestling on till life was ended, foll’wing not the sinful throng / these, who well the fight sustained, triumph through the Lamb have gained.”⁷

The elder’s second answer directs us to that Lamb: “They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:14). The saints in heaven did not save themselves. It was not by their own prowess that they conquered through tribulation. With the clarity that belongs to those already in heaven, the elder ascribes the salvation of believers to the cleansing power of Christ’s blood. Philip Bliss explains our salvation: “Bearing shame and scoffing rude / in my place condemned he stood / Sealed my pardon with his blood / Hallelujah! What a Savior!”⁸

In recent years, some Evangelical scholars have published books urging that less attention be made to the doctrine of Christ’s atoning blood, or that we at least try to soften its gruesome implications. But the elders above know that Christ’s death cannot be reduced merely to the loving sentiments of Jesus’ heart. It was his blood, signifying the payment of death that he offered to God’s justice, that cleanses his people from the guilt and penalty of their sins. James Hamilton writes: “How did the blood of Jesus cleanse them? When Jesus died he paid the penalty for sin, and when they trusted in Jesus, his

⁶ Steve Wilmshurst, *The Final Word: The Book of Revelation Simply Explained* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2008), 98.

⁷ Heinrich T. Schenk, “Who Are These Like Stars Appearing,” 1719.

⁸ Philip P. Bliss, “Man of Sorrows! What a Name!” 1875

payment of the penalty is applied to them. Their sins are washed away when they trust in Christ.”⁹

There are three points we should notice about the cleansing of Christ’s people. First, notice that not only did Christ die for sin, but his people received the cleansing benefits of his death through personal faith. They “washed their robes and made them white” by trusting in Christ’s blood. You must do the same if you will be saved. Second, realize that these are past tense verbs, signifying completed actions. It is true that believers must persevere in faith, but it is also true that at the very moment when you believe in Christ’s blood, you are washed of your sin and stand clothed in white before God. We sometimes sin and need to confess that sin to have our consciences made clean. But true saving faith in Christ’s blood “cleanses us from all our sins” (1 Jn. 1:7) once for all. What John sees of Christ’s people in heaven is true of us immediately upon our faith in him. Jesus taught: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life” (Jn. 3:36). Third, this vision says that the only way anyone can get to heaven is by cleansing his or her sins in the blood of Jesus. John sees the entirety of the heavenly assembly of God’s saved people and they all “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:14). Leon Morris comments: “The complete efficacy of Christ’s atoning death is being strongly asserted. It is on the grounds of His death for men that they are able to stand before the throne properly clothed... They all are saved in this way and no other.”¹⁰

WHERE ARE THEY GOING: OUR DESTINATION

John’s vision has given us a glorious perspective on the heavenly reality that corresponds to the suffering church on earth. Yet even these saints in heaven have a future. John has shown the heavenly destiny of believers and has learned of their deliverance through Christ’s blood. He now concludes the chapter, and this entire cycle of visions that began in chapter 4, with a spectacular description of the eternal destination to which this great multitude of Christ’s people are headed.

⁹ James M. Hamilton, Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 194.

¹⁰ Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 117-8.

Of the three ghosts that visited Ebenezer Scrooge in Dickens' *A Christmas Story*, it was the Ghost of Christmas Future who most deeply affected him. Shrouded in black, this ghost enabled Scrooge to gaze upon his own funeral, to hear the disdain he had earned from people who knew him, and to contemplate the eternal condemnation he deserved. It was this frightful specter that shook his heart so that he repented and returned from his dream to lead a different life. For those who have trusted in Christ, the vision of our future destination is the most uplifting source of encouragement, enabling us to endure the trials and tribulations of this life with joy and hope in service to Christ. If you have not turned to Christ, the blessings awaiting his people urge you to consider the world you will never know unless your sins are washed clean through faith in his blood.

First, John hears of the *shelter* that God provides with his own glorious presence: "Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence" (Rev. 7:15). The saints are admitted before the throne of the holy God because their sins have been washed clean and they are justified in Christ. There, "they render to Him the spontaneous, glad, and thorough devotion of the heart... [in] unceasing worship."¹¹ Worshiping in God's sanctuary, they have immediate access to the glory of his presence. They are now, as Paul put it, "filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:19).

On his part, God receives the church as his own dearly beloved children. The sovereign Creator spreads his presence over them like a tent, so that they dwell in him forever. As a kingdom of priests, the believers fulfill the purpose for which they were made and then were redeemed in the unending adoration of a God they more fully know as eternity stretches on forever. The apostle Paul wrote that in our present life even the best Christian can only "see in a mirror dimly," but then, he adds, we will see God "face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12). Revelation 22:4 fills in the details, saying: "They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads... The Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever."

Second, John is told of the *blessing* that attends Christ's people in the shelter of God's love: "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst

¹¹ William Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1940, 1967), 114.

anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat” (Rev. 7:16). Here is the bliss of the salvation rest to which Christ’s people now journey in the wilderness of a sinful world. On earth, believers are subjected to every kind of deprivation and hardship, but the promise is held before us that our struggle will not be in vain. In the age to come there is no hardship, trial, or loss but only the gain of fullness and joy. David anticipated this bounty in the closing words of Psalm 23: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (Ps. 23:5-6).

Psalm 23 connects with the third feature of our eternal destination: Christ’s eternal *shepherding*. “For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,” John hears, “and he will guide them to springs of living water” (Rev. 7:17). All through this vision, believers have stood before God on his throne and the Lamb. In eternity, just as God makes his presence a tent for us, the Lamb shepherds us to the fullest experience of eternal life, guiding us “to springs of living water.” Leon Morris writes that in heaven, “The saved will always thirst for God, and that thirst will be satisfied”¹² through the ministry of Jesus Christ. The Shepherd who leads his sheep is none other than the One who became a Lamb for us. “Come,” he summons, “everyone who thirsts, come to the waters... that your soul may live” (Isa. 55:1-3).

John’s vision concludes, looking ahead to the final consummation recorded at the end of Revelation: “and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 7:17). We think of the churches to which John was writing, who soon would suffer sore affliction so that their tears would fall. We think of people we know with tears on their cheeks. Our own eyes are often wet with the grief of this broken, fallen world. In the end, when the eternal destination has been reached, there will be no more tears. Every loss will then have been repaid with interest, every grief answered with joy, every longing fulfilled in glory, and as we look into the eyes of God it will be his own loving hand that wipes the tears from ours. Steve Wilmshurst sums up the overall message of Revelation 7 for the suffering church of John’s time and ours: “As

¹² Morris, *The Revelation of St. John*, 119.

God's people we have security today, but tomorrow is unimaginably glorious."¹³

HE WILL SAVE!

I want to conclude with an application given by the prophet Isaiah, since the last two verses of Revelation 7 quote directly from Isaiah 49:10. In an earlier vision, he rejoiced at the glorious restoration that awaits God's people in the end, saying, "They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God" (Isa. 35:1-2). With that in mind Isaiah urged God's people, in the same spirit with which the apostle John writes: "Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, 'Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you'" (Isa. 35:3-4).

¹³ Wilmshurst, *The Final Word*, 100.