

Revelation 7:9-17

All Saints, Nov. 5, 2023
Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

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,¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"¹¹ 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,¹² saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?"¹⁴ I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "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.¹⁵ "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.¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.¹⁷ For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

One of the worst shopping experiences I've ever had was at Morrie's Mazda in Chippewa Falls, WI. My younger brother was in the market for a used car, and both he and our dad had been combing the internet in search for a car that was just the right blend of low miles, low cost, and dependability. One cold Saturday, Nathan and I were at work at our dusty warehouse job, and our dad called and said he'd found a 2008 Honda Accord at the right price just up the street from us at Morrie's Mazda. He'd called the dealership and arranged for us to swing by for a test drive after we were done with work.

And we did. 4:30 pm rolled around, we clocked out, and we headed straight for the dealership. Long story short, they had sold the car about 15 minutes before we arrived, which was upsetting, but not nearly as upsetting as the reception we were given at the dealership. We walked into the showroom, and by the way, we did look disgusting. We'd both just worked ten hours in a cold, dirty warehouse. We both had dirt and grease covering our jeans, we were wearing dusty Carhart jackets, and our hair was all matted down from our winter hats. But we were in the market for a car, we had the money, they had the car, and we both figured our looks didn't really matter.

Boy, were we wrong! As we walked in, a group of salesmen in their shirts and ties that were gathered around the front desk stopped talking and stared at us as we walked by. We followed a salesman to his desk, and he started poking around on the computer. That was when the sales manager walked over, looked me up and down and said, "Do we have a problem here, Mike?" Pretty upsetting! Especially so once we learned the car had been already sold. Everything I experienced that day told me that I did not belong at the prestigious Morrie's Mazda. But, in retrospect, what's really sad about that whole experience is that I realize that I often do that exact same sort of thing.

Humans are very good at dividing, separating people into groups based on all kinds of factors. When we make friends, we search out those people who are most like us, who share the same qualities as us, and then we stick with them because we're most comfortable with them. And there's nothing wrong with that, but then we tend to exclude other people based on the most meaningless things:

where they're from, how they talk, how they dress, what they look like. And you might not ever say it to someone, but we do tend to quickly judge people as not belonging.

And we really do a little bit of that with spiritual things as well. Without even thinking about it, we will look at the outward appearance and categorize people as belonging, *or not*, to that great white host that we just read about, that is, who belongs in heaven. We might think about various people that we might and think things like, "Well, he's definitely going to heaven, but her? No way. I know what *she* did. She's not really a Christian." But on what are we basing that sort of judgment? More often than not, it's based off of some impression we get based on how they look or how they talk.

Is that the determination that God uses? God once said to Samuel, "***The Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.***" (1 Samuel 16:7) When God decides who belongs in heaven or who belongs in hell, He doesn't use the same criteria that we usually use. And in our text today, God gives us a peek behind the curtain. He invites us today to:

Behold a Host, Arrayed in White

- I. God shows us who they are
- II. God shows us what they enjoy

The Apostle John records for us this *dramatic* picture of heaven. We're told that God is there on the throne, next to Him is the Lamb who had been slain. Then there's the elders and the four living creatures and the angels surrounding the throne singing praises to God forever and ever. And none of this is new, this is the way things have always been in heaven. But there is something *new* in this picture of heaven, to which the elder points and says, "***Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?***" He's really asking why these people are here and how could they possibly be standing in the presence of a Holy God.

The answer to that question is totally unrelated to the criteria that we usually apply when we think about whom will be in heaven. Just look at verse 9, and we find that this host is "***from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.***" In other words, the people who are present there in that great white host, the people who are the saints of God, are there with no reference to their ethnicity, nor what language they speak, nor where they're from. We can add to that list that the saints in the great white host are not there because of what job they had, nor how wealthy they were, nor how nicely dressed, not even what church denomination they belonged to! There is only one thing that *all* of these people have in common. The reason why this *diverse* group of people is able to stand before the Lord is found in verse 14: "***They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.***"

Now, when people speak about saints in everyday conversation, they say things like, "She's a saint." "He's saintly." "I'm no saint." And those proclamations are usually based totally on things that people have done or haven't done. If someone goes the extra mile and really helps you out—"Oh, you are a saint!" But being a saint has nothing to do with what you do or don't do. God tells us here that those who are saints are such only because their sins have been washed away in Christ's blood. They are saints in the great white host *not* because they had done a lot for their church, *not* because they had given to the poor, *not* because they'd stuck up for the downtrodden, *not* because they were nice or

friendly or even because they'd avoided really egregious sins. No, this host arrayed in white is standing before God not because of anything they had done. They are there simply because of what Jesus had done, and *only* because of what Jesus had done.

And in this group of saints there are no exceptions. Every single one of them stood before God in the throne room of heaven simply because Jesus had washed their sins away. Not one of them deserved heaven any more than the rest. Not one of them was less sinful than the rest. Not one of them was more or less deserving to be there. But Jesus is the great equalizer, the only one who takes sinners and creates saints. And this was done for you. *You* are a saint before God.

You see, when John was standing there looking at this crowd and seeing all those clothed in their white robes, declared to be saints—you were there too! You are in that crowd looking back at John. I know this to be true, because God tells us as much. He speaks through the prophet Isaiah and says, ***"Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool."*** (Isaiah 1:18) He speaks through the Apostle Paul and says, ***"You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God."*** (1 Corinthians 6:11) And elsewhere through the Apostle John, God declares, ***"The blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin."*** (1 John 1:7) So when the elder asked John, ***"Who are these, clothed in white robes?"***—the answer is you! Even though you are sinful and would maybe *not* describe yourself as saintly, God says that because of His Son you *are* a saint. For your sins have been washed away.

Now, there's kind of a funny thing that we do sometimes, when you're trying to describe how good something is to someone, you might use negative examples to describe something positive. I'll give you an example of what I mean. Let's say you bought a new cell phone, and someone asks how you like it. You might say, "Oh, it's great! It doesn't freeze up, it doesn't drop any calls, the battery doesn't die after six hours like my old phone did. It doesn't get really hot when I use it." That's an example of using negative descriptions. You might say what things are *not* in order to better describe the things that we really like.

And that's really what God is doing here in our text. He describes heaven by telling us what *won't* be there. And that's not because God can't describe in a positive way exactly how great heaven will be, but if He did use that positive terminology, we probably wouldn't understand it. So, instead, He goes through all the things that we don't like about this life that *won't* be in heaven, to help us get a clearer picture of what we will enjoy when we're there as a part of this great white host.

"They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and He will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." The elder is speaking here to John, and he sounds like many of the activists in our world today. What are many activists after? Oh, things like ending world hunger, achieving world peace, and so on. And it's fine to not want anyone to go hungry; it's a good thing for us to share our blessings with others so that no one goes starving. But what we have to realize is that we'll never be able to end all suffering. Our text refers to this life as one *full of suffering*. That's from verse 14, when the elder says, ***"These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation."*** We can want life to get better, but because of the presence of sin in the world, we'll never get rid of all the world's problems.

And that's ok! Because God uses these problems to help guide us to *Him!* If we ended world hunger and had world peace. If we ended poverty worldwide, then no one would need God. No one would look forward to heaven because we'd have heaven on earth. But as it is, this life is full of tribulation, and God uses that fact for our good, guiding us to the paradise that He will provide in heaven.

And so listen to the promises included hear. Do you want to end world hunger? Our text says, ***"They shall hunger no more."*** Do you want clean water for everyone? God says, ***"They shall not thirst anymore . . . and He will guide them to springs of living water."*** Do you want world peace? God says, ***"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes."*** Hey, is climate change your thing? ***"The sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat."*** Every trial and difficulty that you know in your life that makes yours one of great tribulation, God promises to take it all away. In heaven there will be no sin, and there will be none of the effects of sin either.

And there are some other promises in here too. You know, one of the things that can be very discouraging to us as Christians is low church attendance. We get depressed when we don't see many people here in church on Sundays. It's sad that in our church body we have only about 6,000 members. Even the Christian Church at large in the world seems to be shrinking. Every day, the world become more emboldened in its war against God, and every day Christians appear to be more and more in the minority.

The truth is, the Church of God has always been small here on earth. But in heaven, it won't be like that at all. This is a ***"great multitude that no one could number."*** This host of saints *is the fulfillment* of God's promise to Abraham when He told him to look and count the sand on the seashore, to look to the heavens and try to number the stars, with the promise that his descendants would be like that. This picture is what God was pointing to! The true descendants of Abraham, those who share the same faith as Abraham, will finally be together in heaven, a host beyond number. So that feeling of being small, of being in the minority, of discouragement by dwindling numbers, that won't be the case in heaven.

And lastly, another blessing that we'll enjoy in heaven is at the end of verse 15: ***"And He who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence."*** The Greek word for "shelter" there literally means that God will spread His "tabernacle," His "tent" over us. The idea is that we will be with the Lord, and He will be there to protect us. Now, we know of course that He's doing the same thing for us right now on earth, sheltering and protecting us. The main difference in heaven is that God will keep away the hunger and the thirst and the scorching heat and the tears. All of that will no longer be allowed to plague us. In God's sheltering here on earth, however, He allows that all to come, because His ultimate goal in sheltering you here is bringing you home to heaven. So, everything that comes your way now, every difficulty and struggle, God uses to direct you home to heaven.

And that *is* your home. Because being in this great white host, being a saint before God, that isn't just some far off future reality for you. It's already begun. You may not look the part right now, but even now, you are already clothed in white. You are already a saint. You are already a part of that heavenly host because Jesus has already washed you in His blood. He has taken away all the sins that stain you, even the ones you have yet to commit.

So yes, right now, you are already a part of that great white host. We might not be able to enjoy all the perfection that comes with that here on earth, but God gives us a glimpse of what it will be like in order to give us strength now. So, when you think of that perfect unity that awaits you in heaven, it can strengthen you through the divisions that you experience now. When you're discouraged by the small numbers here, you can remember the innumerable host in heaven. And when you cry over the struggles of life here, you can look forward to the *absence* of all tears and pain in heaven. And not only that, you can also be reassured that Your Savior is with you here in this life—sheltering you, guiding you, bringing you home. For you are God's saints, and He will not leave you nor forsake you.

When I walked into that dealership that day with my brother, we couldn't help but feel that we didn't belong there, that we weren't welcome. We were dirty, we were dusty, probably smelly, and no one at the dealership tried to hide the fact that we simply stuck out as not belonging.

If you were to try to earn heaven for yourself by trying your best to stop sinning, by trying your hardest to please God, well then you would look just as dirty and dusty and out of place as my brother and I did that day. You would not belong in heaven at all if God just looked at your actions. You'd stick out from the crowd as not belonging. But God doesn't see as man sees. For man looks at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart. Now, that doesn't mean that He looks at you and sees that deep down you're a good person, deep down you're trying your best, deep down you're nice. No, that still wouldn't be good enough. It means that God looks at your heart. And because of the faith in Christ that He's planted there, when He looks at His heart, God sees His Son Jesus.

He looks at His Son and sees Him who never once sinned. He sees Him who willingly went to the cross for you. God sees His son, and counts it all for you. Your sinful rags have been washed clean by Christ so that you are now just another face in the crowd, another member of the great white host. You won't stick out, for you also have been forgiven of all; you also are a saint. Thanks be to God, in Jesus' name. Amen.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7) Amen.