

A Vision of Glory

<sup>9</sup>After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. <sup>10</sup>And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

<sup>11</sup>All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, <sup>12</sup>saying:

"Amen! Praise and glory  
and wisdom and thanks and honor  
and power and strength  
be to our God for ever and ever.  
Amen!"

<sup>13</sup>Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?"

<sup>14</sup>I answered, "Sir, you know."

And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. <sup>15</sup>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.

<sup>16</sup>'Never again will they hunger;  
never again will they thirst.

The sun will not beat down on them  
nor any scorching heat.

<sup>17</sup>For the Lamb at the center of the throne  
will be their shepherd;

'he will lead them to springs of living water.

'And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'"

Just for a minute, I want you to imagine that you are a Christian living in the first century AD. You've witnessed the growth of the Christian church as the apostles took the good news of Jesus throughout the Mediterranean world. But now, things have taken a turn for the worse. The Roman government has outlawed Christianity. Believers are being persecuted, beheaded, thrown to the lions. All but one of the 12 apostles have been put to death for preaching about Jesus. And the only one whose left is in exile on an island in the Mediterranean. If you were a Christian in the first century AD, you might very well be asking, "God, why is this happening? How much worse is it going to get?"

You realize, those kinds of questions are not asked only by first century Christians. They're still being asked by Christians today. As we look at the world around us, as we face persecution in various forms, as we endure personal hardships in our lives, we may find ourselves asking, "God, how bad is it going to get? What hope do we have for our future?"

Fortunately, God provides us with some answers to questions like these, for Christians of every century. And he does it by means of a vision that God gave to that one last apostle, the apostle John. When John was exiled on the Isle of Patmos, Jesus himself came to John in a vision to reveal to him what the future would hold for the Christian church. That vision is what we now call the book of “Revelation,” the final book in the New Testament.

Now, a lot of people think that Revelation is a hard read, filled with mysteries that no one can understand. But the fact is, Revelation has a pretty simple message. In fact, it's kind of a double message. And the message is simply this: things are going to be bad. And yet, things are going to be great. Revelation is a book that is designed to give us an accurate picture of what the future holds for the Christian church, first, in time, then, and in eternity.

That's why, if you look at the book as a whole, almost half of it consists of scenes that describe how bad it's going to get, visions of the battles that God's enemies are going to wage against the Church. For example, in the chapter immediately prior to our text for today, John sees this vision of horseman representing things like war and famine and death. He sees the souls of those who are martyred for their faith in Jesus. These were all glimpses of how bad it's going to get.

But then in contrast to what we might call those bad visions regarding life here on earth, John is also granted this amazing vision of what life in heaven will be like. In fact, we have one of those visions as our sermon text today. It's a vision of all the saints gathered around the throne of God. We might call it,

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As we take a little closer look at this divinely inspired vision of heaven, it's only appropriate to ask a few questions like:

Who is there?

What are they doing?

How did they get there?

What are they enjoying?

And what does it all mean for our lives today?

First, who does John see in heaven? John tells us in v. 9: *After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language.* Just as God once promised Father Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky in the sand and the seashore, just as Jesus once promised that “*many will come from the east and west to take their place in the kingdom of heaven,*” so also John sees that same immeasurable crowd of believers from around the world now gathered around the throne of God. I don't know about you, but every time I hear a report about the mission work that WELS is doing in some far corner of the world, every time I hear the Bible is being translated into a new dialect, I'm reminded of this vision of people from every nation, tribe and language gathered around the throne of God. John also says that “*they were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.*” In Bible times, people waved palm branches as an expression of celebration or to acknowledge royalty. You think about the Palm Sunday parade. Well, this is, in effect the continuation of that parade all the way into heaven, as these believers give glory to their God and King.

And, exactly what were these believers praising God for? John tells us. *They cried out in a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”* In other words, this crowd gives God credit for the greatest gift of all, namely, the eternal salvation of a world full of sinners. And how do the angels in heaven respond to what God has done? John

tells us. *They fell down on their faces before the throne of God and worshiped God, saying, "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God forever and ever. Amen!"*

So, you have every creature in heaven giving glory to God. But now someone might ask, "This multitude of people from every nation—how they get into heaven? Did they have to meet a certain criteria? Did they have to live up to a particular standard? What are, like, the minimum requirements to get into heaven? Or in the words of one of the elders who asked the apostle John about this multitude standing in front of him, *"Who are they, and where did they come from?"* When John can't answer the question, the elder answers it for him. He says, *"These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."*

Now, I want you to notice three things about that statement, starting with the end and working to the beginning. First, think about those words, *"they made (their robes) white in the blood of the Lamb."* That sounds a little backwards doesn't it? Typically, blood is not a stain remover. Blood is the stain itself. If you try to remove a stain on your shirt by washing it in blood, you're going to have a real mess on your hands. But when it comes to our spiritual attire, when it comes to what we look like before God, there is only one thing that can remove the worst of all stains. The ultimate stain-remover is the blood of the Lamb. What does Scripture say? *The blood of Jesus, God's Son, purifies us from all sin. (1 John 1:17).*

Secondly, notice that the fact that all the saints washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb implies that the saints had formerly been wearing robes that were dirty. They all had stains that needed to be washed. That's certainly consistent with what the Prophet Isaiah said about all mankind when he wrote, *All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags. (Isaiah 64:6).* In other words, the people who John sees around the throne are not there because they were inherently better than everyone else. They weren't there because they avoided the big stains in life. They weren't there because they did enough good things to make up for the bad things they had done. No, they were there because they had allowed their robes to be washed in the blood of the Lamb. Jesus' blood had dressed them in a robe of perfection. That's what the prophet Isaiah meant when he wrote *"I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me with a robe of his righteousness. (Isaiah 61:10)*

But notice that there is one more way that this group of sinners-turned-saints is described. The Bible says, *These are they who have come out of the great tribulation.* What does that mean? What is the great tribulation? Well, you maybe know that some Christian churches teach that the great tribulation is a period of time, (many say it's a period of 7 years), when the Christian church will go through intense persecution and suffering, immediately before Jesus returns to establish his millennial kingdom here on earth for a thousand years. There are others who believe that Jesus will spare Christians from the Tribulation by means of the Rapture, that is, by taking them directly into heaven and leaving everyone else to suffer through the Tribulation. Well, neither of those ideas are consistent with what Scripture teaches.

When the Bible refers to those who have come out of the great tribulation, (actually, the Bible uses the present tense there: "those who are coming out of the great tribulation"), in that case, the Bible is not referring to a period of intense suffering that Christians may or may not be spared from. Rather, the Bible is saying that all those who have washed their robes in the Lamb and are now standing in the presence of God in heaven—they've all come through the great tribulation.

What is that great tribulation? In essence, it's the entire length of our lives here as Christians here on earth. It's that period of time when we must endure trials and temptations. The times when we are subject to pain and heartaches. Times when we face persecution for what we believe. You think of the teenage girl who's doing her best to live her faith in a secular world and yet feels pressured to compromise her morals or conform to the desires of others. You think of the mother who cries herself to sleep thinking about a son who no longer wants anything to do with the church. Or the young man who, on a daily basis, fights a battle against his private temptations. These are the kinds of tribulations we face as Christians on this side of the grave. Let's face it, Jesus never said that becoming a Christian would make our lives easier. Quite the opposite. Jesus once told his disciples, *"In this world, you will have trouble. (John 16:33)* Or as Paul said to the Christians in Antioch, *"We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. (Acts 14:22)*. The point is this. The great tribulation is not merely some event that will happen at the end of time. It's something that Christians like you and me will continue to experience until the day we die—or the day that Jesus returns, whichever comes first.

And when the end of that tribulation arrives, what will we then get to enjoy in all its glory? First, the presence of God. Our text describes the believers in heaven with these words, *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.* Literally, the Greek there says that God will "pitch his tent over them." It's the same word that John used in his gospel to describe how Jesus took on flesh and lived for a while among us. In other words, here on earth Jesus lived with us. In heaven we will live with him.

Our text also describes heaven in terms of what believers will no longer experience. We read, *Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them, nor any scorching heat.* In other words, there will be no pain in heaven, even though we'll have our bodies reunited with our souls.

And maybe the best part of heaven for believers will be the fact that... *The Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.* When Jesus offered "living water" to the woman at Jacob's well, he wasn't talking about H<sub>2</sub>O. He was talking about eternal life. That's what our Good Shepherd gives to us. He's brought us to springs of living water.

So, tell me, why did God give John this vision of glory? Well, he gave it for the same reason that he also had John write it down for us to read today. The reason is to prepare us for the present by giving us a glimpse of the future. Think about it. Maybe right now, you are carrying a load of guilt or shame or regret for things that you said or did. It's weighing you down and making you feel unclean. Well, look to the future and see that your filthy robes of sin have been washed clean in the blood of the Lamb. Maybe right now you're feeling all alone, isolated, estranged from the world or even estranged from your family. Look to the future and see a countless multitude from every nation, tribe and language that you are already a part of, by the work of the Holy Spirit. Maybe right now your body is hurting because it's breaking down or your heart is hurting because you've lost a loved one or are afraid you will. Look to the future and see that the Lamb who was once slain for you is now your Good Shepherd and he promises that one day he will wipe every tear from your eyes. Yes, you can be sure that the word of your Lord is trustworthy and true: on this side of the grave there will be trouble. But on the other side, by God's grace through faith in Jesus, there will only be triumph, there will be only glory. And for that we say with all the saints gathered around the throne: *"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power forever and ever."* (Rev. 5:13) Amen.