

*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 in front of 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 spread his tent over them.*

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

*The sun will not beat upon 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.” (Revelation 7:9-17)*

### **Why are these People so Happy?**

What kind of a week did you have? Mine was a little frustrating. A project I've been working on for a very long time is not going well and it made me tense. What about you? Did you have a good week? Or was it a particularly bad one? And whether this was a good or bad week, what kind of a life are you having? Are you happy? Or are you frustrated and disappointed with the way your life is going? Are you depressed or angry because it's not turning out the way that you hoped that it would? Most of us struggle with life sometimes. When you struggle, when you're feeling beaten and frustrated, how do you feel when you come across one of those positive, upbeat people? Jealous? Puzzled? Confused? Probably all of the above. We might wonder how that person can be so happy. Today, in the book of Revelation, St. John relates to us a vision he saw, a vision of a huge multitude of people rejoicing. For people like us who have to live in this world where we don't always feel like that, it's worthwhile to ask, **why are these people so happy?**

#### **I.**

John gives us the answer to the question. **Why are these people so happy? Because they've come out of the great tribulation.** These people are, indeed, happy. They've gathered from every nation on earth, and yet there is no strife between them. They're wearing white robes and holding palm branches and standing before the very throne of God. And they're praising God. And the four living creatures around the throne –

you may remember them from last week, they are four high ranking angels – these four creatures are answering their shouts of praise and praising him themselves.

As we noted last week, around these four creatures, there's a ring of 24 elders who represent the Church of the Old and New Testaments. One of them asks John a question, **“These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?”** Now, he already knows the answer, but he wanted to see if John understands what he's seeing. And John very humbly defers. So the elder tells him: **“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.”**

Keep in mind that this crowd of people is from every tribe and language and people and nation. They're wearing white robes – a symbol of being made holy in God's sight. So who are they? These people are the Christian Church. They're the believers of every time and place gathered before God in heaven. They have come out of the great tribulation. What does that mean? For the last forty years, that term, “the great tribulation” has taken on a meaning for some Christians that it really doesn't have here. They believe that it refers to a final seven year period of suffering on this earth before Jesus returns. But that point of view really misses the point. The theme of the entire book of Revelation is the struggle which we Christians endure while we live in a sinful world and the rescue that is coming. So what the elder meant by this expression “the great tribulation” is really quite simple: he means life on this earth, with all its hurts and sorrows and difficulties.

Now does calling life in this world – the life we lead every single day – “the great tribulation” seem a little dark to you? Maybe the fact that I had a frustrating week is affecting my view of life? Well, that could be true. But it doesn't change the fact that God's word speaks of this life with this language. The great tribulation is right now. Of course, God is gracious and he does give us many, many blessings in our lives. And it's a good thing for us not to wallow in the hard things we face. Even when we hurt, we should remember God's promises and rejoice in the blessing we have.

But life here is full of painful things. As much as it is a privilege to serve in the ministry, being a pastor means that I spend a lot of time in hospitals, praying with people who are scared and in physical pain. I spend a lot of time with elderly people whose bodies don't work as well as they used to and who often hurt every single day. I spend time with people who've lost someone they love. I spend time with people whose marriages are in trouble or over. I have to keep a box of Kleenex in my office at all times because a week doesn't go by without someone shedding tears in there. People we love betray us. People we trusted don't come through for us. The job we were so thrilled to get becomes a burden we wish we could escape from. And people around us sin against us. We expect them to treat us well, but many people don't. We hurt every time we get kicked in the teeth.

All that hurt is real. It makes this life the great tribulation, the great suffering. And you know what? It's not going to change. Specific issues might get better. You might get over that illness. You might repair that damaged relationship. You might find a better job. But hurt will be a part of life here until Christ returns.

So why are the people that John saw so happy? Because they're before the throne of God. They're in heaven. They've been set free from all hurt and sorrow. Why? You hear it in what they shout: **“Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”** Salvation means rescue. Our rescue from all that this life does to us comes from God. It belongs to him and to the Lamb. They're the only ones who could rescue us from all the hurts of this life. And they have! When we first met the Lamb in Revelation last week, we said that he had been slain and was now alive again. During this Easter season, we can't help but see what that means. Jesus died on Good Friday but now he lives again. He rose on Easter Sunday morning. He rose to set us free from the power of death and hell and also from the power of sadness and hurt, because he set us free from sin.

Remember, the elder said that those in white robes had washed their clothes in the blood of the Lamb. That's why they were white. Very graciously, my wife does the laundry in our home. Sometimes, she comes across a stain that stubbornly refuses to come out. That's the picture in washing their robes. The robes represent their lives – our lives, because we are a part of this great multitude. Sin is a stain in our lives, a stain that we can't possibly bleach out. No matter how hard we try, the sin in our hearts poisons all that we do and say and think and feel. It makes us guilty before God. But Jesus washed that stain away. The blood he shed on the cross bleaches our lives clean in God's sight.

Jesus died for us. Then he rose. In that resurrection are all the promises God gives us. The resurrection promises us that our sin is gone and that we will live with him forever. It promises us that God cares for us every day that we live here. It promises us that God has overcome all that's wrong and painful about our lives because all the hurt in this world comes from sin. When God made the world it was perfect. When Adam and Eve led the whole human race into sin, all that we suffer came as a result. But Jesus died and he rose. He conquered all the sin of all the world. He conquered our sin. He has set us free from our guilt. And he will set us free from all that sin does to us. When we reach heaven, all our hurt will be done forever.

## II.

That leads to a question that pastors sometimes hear. What will heaven be like? God addressed the book of Revelation to the Church as it struggles with life here, as it suffers persecution for its faith, as it wrestles with all the hurt and sorrow that come with life in a world where sin ruins everything. The book of Revelation is designed to give us hope while we live here. Its purpose is to even enable us to rejoice while we have all those hard things going on. It does that by focusing us on what's coming. So, when we consider these Christians before the throne of God, it's natural for us to ask, **Why are these people so happy? Because God will take care of them forever.**

So what is heaven like? That question is difficult to answer. Many people have tried. Many books, movies and TV shows have tried to show what the writer thinks heaven will be like. But the truth is, we don't know. We can't know because God never gives us a detailed description of it. I personally think that's because heaven will be so unlike anything that we've ever experienced that we would misunderstand anything God did say about it.

So God doesn't describe it for us. Other than what he says here. He says about those saints in heaven, **"They are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them."** This is perhaps the greatest part about heaven. We will be with God. We will be with Jesus. What makes that so great? We'll be with the one who loves us. When you love people, you love being with them. You don't even have to be doing anything. A husband and a wife can sit in the living room while one reads the paper and the other does a crossword puzzle, but just being together is nice. Well, God loves us so much that he sent his Son to die for us. Jesus loves us and he came and did all that for us. In heaven, we will be with them. And we will serve them. We will sing their praises forever – day and night in God's temple. That, too, will be a joy for us.

But that's not all of it. God promises, **"Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat."** Going to bed hungry was something that happened to people in John's day – as it is today for some people. Lack of drinkable water was a real problem. And in the Mediterranean world, having the sun beat down on you while you were working could easily cause sunstroke. Perhaps our day-to-day problems are different. But the point is the same: no more hardship. All that sin does to us here is over. And God will keep us safe from any harm or loss ever again.

God says, **"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."** Lambs aren't shepherds. People are. They take care of the sheep. But the Lamb here is Christ. And he is our Good Shepherd. In heaven, he will care for us forever. And God will wipe every tear from our eyes. Not only won't we suffer anymore, but none of what we have suffered will hurt any more. Think, my friends, of how many things in your life have hurt in the past and how many of them you still struggle to get over. Think of the scars of the betrayals and the disappointments and the sins. Think of your own guilt over the things you've done and said and the tears that have come to your eyes. In heaven, all that will be over. I won't need any Kleenex in my office. In heaven, all the sin will be gone from our hearts. And we will be perfectly at peace.

All that begins when we leave this life. When Jesus returns, it continues. We will rise and body and soul we will be with the Lord. All that does mean something to us today. This life is the great tribulation. It does hurt. But it won't last forever. There's a better life coming. God has a greater joy in store for us. There will be a time of healing. All that is ours because Jesus died and he rose from the dead. All those promises come back to the Lamb who was slain and who now lives. God told us all this to encourage us now. In all the hurt, in all the sadness and frustration, God says that he loves us. God says that in Christ we have conquered even then things that we struggle with most right now. God promises strength now to get through those things. And a life to come when we will be free.

That's why all those people in the vision were so happy. And never forget, my friends, you are part of that vision. You are one of those people, dressed in white robes, waving palm branches before the throne of God. You will be that happy. Even if you've had a lousy week – even if you're having a lousy life – rejoice in what is coming. The Lamb promises all this to you. Amen.