

## Revelation 7:9-17 – “Christ for Eternity”

Last week we looked at the first half of Revelation 7—the whole chapter is an interlude in the drama of Revelation: the first part of this interlude is a symbolic “pause”—the angels are holding back the four winds while God’s people are marked with a seal to protect them from the coming war waged against them by the enemies of Christ. The second part of the interlude is a window into the future, after all the suffering, persecutions, and wars are over, when finally God’s people gather together in victory on the great Day of Jesus Christ. The first half is a glimpse behind the curtain of our reality into the spiritual realm—showing God bringing salvation to thousands of people. In times of calamity when Christians pray for strong faith to endure. The first half of chapter 7 is intended to strengthen our faith, but especially the faith of those Christians who lived through the early centuries after the so-called Christianization of the Roman Empire, as Europe began its descent into the long era of suffering we sometimes call, “The Dark Ages”. The second half of chapter 7 is a *prolepsis*<sup>i</sup>—a technical word that means a peak into the future to see how it all turns out. Imagine what this means whether in the fourth century or the 21<sup>st</sup> century: believers get to see a glimpse of our destination while we are still on the journey! In their book, *How People Change*, by Paul Tripp and Timothy Lane, they explain that knowing our destination can be a source of great power for how we walk the journey of life:

"The eyes of eternity alone can tell us what is worth living and dying for. Think very practically and personally for a moment. What are you living for? What is your goal in life? What is the end of your, “If only I had\_\_\_\_\_”? Every time you confront a friend, raise your voice at your child, or give your spouse the silent treatment, you hope to accomplish something. What is the goal? If you study for hours or work sixty hours a week, you have a purpose in mind. What hopes and promises are giving direction to your life?..."<sup>iii</sup>

### The Promise about the Future

It’s something of a surprise in verse 9, just after John in his vision hears that 144,000 of God’s people are marked for protection from the coming judgements, but then as the scene changes, he looks and sees not 144,000, but “a great multitude that no one could number” (v9). That’s a figure of speech by the way, like when Joseph helped the Egyptians gather food during 7 years of good harvests, to prepare for 7 years of famine, it says they gathered so much food that “it could not be measured”, meaning it was not practical to attempt to count it all, there was so much. Although God knows specifically who belongs to Him (that’s the point of the precise number, 144,000 in the first part of the chapter), the number of God’s people who come together in victory on the day of the Resurrection is a number so big it will blow your mind. And look at the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity of Christians at the end of this age (in the second part of the chapter)! [read v9-10] Not only is the size of this multitude a surprise—so is their unity! That crowd will be made up of people from every nation and language, but they will all be passionate about the same thing, about the same King! [read v10] The language of verse 10 makes this a sort of political miracle: “**they** shouted with a loud voice” (my translation). Maybe you dream of world peace? That’s exactly what this future promises! You wish Palestine and Israel could get along—much less you and your neighbour? “Peace on Earth, good will to men” will happen (this is a prolepsis, a peak into the future!) because of the Saviour God sent, the Lamb who died, the King who reigns forever from the throne of God. I know this doesn’t answer all of our questions—yours or mine—“Why does God allow evil? Or Cancer? Or Sexual abuse? Or abortion? Or genocide?” I’m just pointing to this preview of the future in God’s Word and showing that one day every single worshipper of Jesus will vindicate and

exonerate God by their own testimony: every single soul will with one voice shout out acclaim and not accusations. On that day the most important thing in our minds, the most precious fact to our hearts, will be the Salvation of God in Christ Jesus (the Lamb) (v10). But all of us will be in agreement on that day that the most wonderful, lovely, beautiful object of our worship is God our Saviour. If only we had the faith and wisdom to believe that now.

### The Path through the Present

Holy Scripture gives believers a powerful perspective: God's Word reminds us of His faithfulness in the past, and gives us glimpses of the beautiful future Christ is preparing for all who know His salvation. But all of that God-given perspective is intended to equip is in the here and now. This is where we live. It is in the now of each moment that we battle temptation, endure hostility, suffer, believe, hope, and pray. The Promise of Revelation 7 is more powerful than you might realize, for equipping us in the present. The theme of the worshipping multitude is likewise taken from the Old Testament: from the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. That feast was the final great feast in the biblical, Israelite calendar. It takes place this year starting next Sunday I think. A harvest feast, giving thanksgiving to God for providing for the daily needs of His people. But it was more than that too: After God rescued Israel from slavery, but before they entered the Promised Land, while they were still journeying in the wilderness, God told Moses,

"And you shall take on the first day the fruit of splendid trees, branches of palm trees [**notice again the end of verse 9!**] and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days. You shall celebrate it as a feast to the Lord for seven days in the year. It is a statute forever throughout your generations; you shall celebrate it in the seventh month. You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." (ESV Leviticus 23:40-43)

Now "booths" or "tabernacles" are simply individual shelters—we might say "tents" or "shelters".<sup>iii</sup> In the Feast of Tabernacles there were palm branches and tents and a feast. In it the people remember how God rescued them from Egypt, protected them during the wilderness wanderings, gave them water and food in the hot and barren desert, and then annual harvests in the Promised Land. It looked back to God's salvation in the past, looked ahead to God's salvation in the future, and reminded them of God's saving grace for the present harvest. There are at least 3 references to the Feast of Tabernacles in Revelation 7: the multitude waving palm branches (v9), the promise that the Lamb will "shelter" His people (v15, the Greek word is the same as "tabernacle" or "tent")<sup>iv</sup>, and the references in verses 16-17 to hungering and thirsting in the scorching heat, and "springs of living water" in the wilderness. These are all ways that God provided for Israel as they followed Moses to the Promised Land.

By the lifetime of Jesus, the Feast of Tabernacles had come to include a lot of tradition. People would pour water on the altar to remember the miracle of water from the rock at a place called Horeb, and they would light lamps at night, to remember the way God led them as a pillar of fire by night. I can't think of two images that give any better picture of why you and I struggle so hard to follow Jesus now. We thirst. For all kinds of things. And it is so hard to be content, to feel satisfied. Sin is like drinking salt-water. But doesn't your soul long for the true water that will one day take our thirst away? Then there's the darkness. Psalm 19 says "Your Word is a lamp to my feet" (v105), but we seem to forget to take it with us most nights. So we stumble around in the dark and trip and fall, and we have the bruises and

scars to prove it. Between the darkness that confuses us and the thirst that sometimes almost drives us mad, the life of a Christian very often feels like we're deeply dissatisfied and going nowhere. Jesus went down to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles according to John 7 (vv2,10). Jesus saw the procession of the Jews celebrating the Feast, marching up the hill, waving their palm branches, under the light of their lamps, to pour water on the altar—remembering the old stories written by Moses, but thirsty still and in spiritual darkness. And those people waving their palm branches, remembering the water and light God gave their ancestors in the wilderness, they had no idea that their God was standing among them at that feast. What difference do you think it would make to know God is with us now, in the present, just as He has been with His people in ancient times? What decisions would we make differently?

### The Presence of Christ forever

**[read John 7:37]** The living water that gives eternal life comes from Jesus. As the sun rose and the festival lamps no longer seemed bright but dim and faint in comparison to the Dawn, Jesus stood up again and cried out that He is the Sun—an invitation to Israel—the same invitation we hear still today every time the Gospel is preached: **[read John 8:12]**. The second scene of John's vision in Revelation 7 is like a cosmic group photo taken on that future day when every single believer who ever comes to Jesus, who responds to His invitation to receive His grace, are gathered together around His throne, basking in His light, satisfied forever with His presence, sheltered for all eternity under His sovereign protection, worshipping Him, adoring Him, loving Him with joy inexpressible, never again to experience dissatisfaction, insecurity, cravings, temptation, fear, distress, or grief. This is another surprise—a fantastic twist in the plot of human history! Let me explain why this is surprising.

One of the representatives of this worshipping multitude comes to John in his vision and asks about the crowd: **[read vv13-14]**. The "Great Tribulation" refers to the Bible's teaching that the people of God would go through a long era of persecution—when the enemies of Christ would wage war against the Jewish people and against the Church. We learned a bit about that in my sermons on Daniel, and we will be learning more about that in the prophecies of chapter 8-16. The followers of Christ symbolized by the 144,000 sealed in the first part of chapter 7 were just about to enter the worst era of that tribulation. And that's the surprising thing, the point of the elder's rhetorical question: Looking at this jubilant, victorious, international multitude of worshippers, you would never guess what they've just come through! What kind of future can erase our pain, leaving no trace or scar or lingering sadness? Eternity is stretching out before these people in an unending happy adventure, and the very presence of Christ Jesus Himself among them! It's exciting even to imagine! Wouldn't you give anything to be part of that multitude, to be shouting with them about God's salvation on that great first day of Eternity? Look with me at the word "therefore" in verse 15: it is the word that explains how that future can be yours because it explains how, in spite of what that multitude of believers had suffered, they arrived safely at their glad destination **[read vv15-17]**. In a single word, the reason is, "Jesus". If you come to Jesus and walk with Him in the present, you will stand with Jesus forever.

**[read v9]** The people of Jesus from every place on Earth have Jesus in common: they all are "clothed in white robes", which the elder goes on to explain to John, **[read v14b]**. They once were spiritually blind, they once were parched and dying in humanity's desert wilderness of sin and death, but they have been led to the Promised Land because Christ Jesus, the Lamb of God, gave His life for theirs. He wore our guilty filth to the cross, so that we can wear His perfect righteousness forever, the symbolic "robes of white"! Hundreds of thousands, even millions of imperfect but forgiven believers have gone before us,

enduring tribulation, persevering through the Dark Ages of this world, yearning for the Promised Land. And this chapter shows us they arrived at their destination, and so will we, if we follow their example as they followed Jesus Christ. It was His perfect righteousness, His presence, His promise, His protection that saved them. And He will save you and me also if we trust Him.

*“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... for the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd...”* I love this quote from *How People Change*,

"Your destination is secure. All of the things that are truly worth living for cannot be taken away from you! Yes, you can lose your job, your health, your house, your car, or your friend. The loss of any of these things would be hard. But you cannot lose your identity in Christ. You cannot lose his love and grace. You cannot lose his gift of forgiveness or the place reserved for you in heaven... You will not escape the difficulties of life, but you can rest assured that your Savior will use each one to prepare you for the place he is taking you."<sup>v</sup>

It should be no wonder that multitudes shout for joy about the salvation Christ has won for them! But it should be an awesome and wondrous thought that the host of Heaven's angels are undone by the sight and sound of the people whom Jesus saves: [read v11-12] Angels get to see some amazing, incredible sights: but this is the greatest thing the angelic armies ever get to witness—the Church of Christ in glory at last! Someone has said we should spend the rest of our lives contemplating, meditating on these words they sing: “Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever!” Because of the Lamb. Because of Jesus. These are the glorious truths you and I would never be able to shut up about if only we knew now what the angels will realize on that day. May the riches of the presence of Christ, and the joy of His salvation, empower you as you follow Him through the wilderness in the present, until you reach the future He has promised.

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<sup>i</sup> "Prolepsis" Merriam-Webster.com Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 12 Sept. 2018

<sup>ii</sup> *How People Change*, Timothy S. Lane, Paul David Tripp. (New Growth Press. Kindle Edition.) p51.

<sup>iii</sup> The Hebrew, מִשְׁכָּן, (see Holladay's Lexicon, #5209) is equivalent to the Greek, σκηνη (Friebert's Lexicon, #24546) = tent, dwelling place, tabernacle, shelter.

<sup>iv</sup> C.f. fn. iii

<sup>v</sup> Lane and Tripp, *Ibid.* pp53-54.