

Sermon: A great crowd before the throne

Rev 7:9vv

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Intro

Here in Egypt, the crucial question for many of us is, what will happen in the near future. We feel insecure today, because tomorrow seems so dark. Today we have an hour of power outage, what will happen tomorrow, next week?

If we would know that next year Egypt would be a great and perfect place to live in, we would have no problem with some period of economic suffering now. The problem is, we do not know our future. It may be worse!

For understanding our life today, for assessing how to live now, we need to know where we are heading.

This is not only a temporary problem for us in Egypt at this time – it is the search of all mankind, and the core issue of religion. Where do we come from, where do we go to. And therefore, who are we... and how shall we live today.

1 New Humanity: the plan of God

St John got a magnificent view in heaven. He sees the future of mankind – and this vision of John can help us understand our situation of today.

There, right before the throne of God – John sees mankind that has reached its destiny. People from all over the world, and from all tribal, linguistic and social and economic backgrounds. And they are all together, united in love and worship for God.

Mankind sings one song together. The confusion of languages and nations that began in Babel – see Genesis 11 - has finally ended. God began this process of creating a new mankind at Pentecost, when people from all nations and languages began to follow Jesus Christ – and He will finish the process of salvation, John shows us. God creates one nation, united in praising God and the Lamb, that is, Jesus, the Son of God.

And this saved mankind leads all other beings in heaven in worshipping God. Even the angels fall on their faces to worship at the prodding of the people of God.

This was the plan of God from the dawn of history. He created man for loving and worshipping God in one united family, united even with the angels. What a spectacular idea! People from Israel and Palestine, Brazil, and Holland, from Syria, Lybia, Sudan, from Egypt, from the USA, England, together they worship God in unity.

The nations fight no longer – they are united in their one pursuit – of worshipping God and Jesus Christ. We get here a heavenly view of reality. This is the end-goal of history. And this should be our lifestyle today.

One of the heavenly beings asks John, ‘do you know who these people are?’

‘These are the ones who come out of the Great Tribulation and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb’, is the answer.

So who are these people?

John wrote his book of Revelation at a time of persecution. All over the Roman Empire the Christians faced big problems. John himself was banned to the Island of Patmos, just as many other church leaders faced problems. People were killed, put in prison, sent to the mines.

People lost their jobs, they were powerless, and they were dishonoured. Being a Christian was not a glorious thing at all.

John sees the great crowd of Christians from all nations, and he understands: These are the ones coming out of the Great Tribulation. As seen from the perspective of the world, these people were persecuted, they suffered hardship, they were poor, they suffered power cuts.

From the perspective of heaven – these people stand before the throne of God. That’s a very different viewpoint!

We see here the complete church at the end of history. They are a crowd that no-one can count. This is a reminder of God’s promise to Abraham that he would bring forth many nations, impossible to count. Here we see the promise to Abraham fulfilled. What God has promised will happen in the beginning of history, will be fulfilled. He will save and bless his people. Amen?

The vision John received was to encourage us to look at our destiny from the perspective of God. It is easy in our life to focus on problems, on what goes wrong, on imperfection. But our destiny is the throne of God. That is where we will end up.

No wonder the angels in heaven rejoice and worship God. There is joy among the angels over one sinner who is saved. Imagine their joy with the great multitude that is saved. The redemption of mankind has finally been achieved...

Some theologians believe that the description of the great multitude is really a description of the fate of martyrs only. This seems not reasonable to

me. They are in heaven because of the blood of Christ. Not because they have shed their own blood. And if they are there because of the blood of Christ, this is true for all who believe in Christ.

What marks these people is that they are coming from the Great Tribulation. They have experienced hard times. They have lived on earth as pilgrims, as strangers in a strange land. I think it describes all normal Christians. All of the church, you and I included, end up before God.

So when you go through times of hardship, do not forget your destiny. Those who hold on to the faith and serve God in all circumstances, await a great future. You are destined to be with God!

2 Exist for the praise of God and the Lamb

John shows is the Church that has survived the hardship of life, and has now entered into the ultimate reality of salvation. The words used in this worship service in heaven are interesting. We read that all in heaven worship God, saying:

Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." (Rev 7:12)

God is all that and more. All these virtues belong to Him.

Those persecuted Christians that John was writing to, they seemed to be the opposite: they were powerless, without glory, without wisdom, without honour. What honour is there in being persecuted?

But as Christians we hold a secret. In an ancient commentary on the book of Revelation, by a church father Primasius, from the sixth century, I read this:

Do not think that God alone is capable of the virtues mentioned here. He has found them worthy also to give to the faithful. We rejoice that the Church of Christ is allowed to participate in all of these good things: blessing, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honour, power and might.

3 Eternal blessing – for today as well

What God truly owns in his inner being, honour, might, glory, is granted to you. You are all children of God through Jesus Christ – his firstborn son. We are by faith hidden with Christ in God – so we are family with God in a way. What a destiny to look forward to! But this destiny is already ours – even today.

What the world considers our shame, we believe to be our honour. Being weak makes us strong. Our wisdom is Jesus Christ, our glory is in God, our power is the Holy Spirit in us.

God is today at work in our lives in accordance with how he will one day complete our lives – when we enter into the throne-hall of his temple. He crowns you today with honour and glory in as far as you are related to our honourable and glorious Lord Jesus Christ.

On that day, in eternity, we will celebrate the victory of God. His enemies will be done away with; salvation will be complete. But we who are in Christ, already today rejoice in his victory, even though our lives are far from perfect or pleasant.

To make it to eternity with God is the greatest victory imaginable. That is why the great multitude from every nation is depicted as having palm branches in their hands – symbols of victory.

The Jews used palm branches during some of their festivals – especially at the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles. During that feast, Jews even today build huts of palm branches and they live in it a few days.

By doing so, they remember the hard days of travel through the desert after the exodus from Egypt, and how God helped them in those hard days. And they celebrate how God brought them into the Promised Land, their place of rest.

In heaven we see how all the redeemed from the nations celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. After our long pilgrimage through the desert of the world, we end up in the Promised Land – with God. We enter into our eternal rest. And because we know that heaven is our destination, we have strength for living joyfully today.

The description by John seems full of reminders of the journey of Israel through the desert and of the rest that followed.

The church consists of people who have white robes, washed in the blood of the Lamb. This is symbolic of course – washing in blood literally is unlikely to lead to white robes. It is about how our sins are forgiven and how the perfection of Jesus is put on our heavenly account based on His life, death and resurrection.

In the desert, before the priests could meet with God, they had to wash their clothes – symbolising their need for inner purity. Without this inner holiness no one can appear before God. In heaven, our holiness will be perfected.

We read also how in eternity, God will shelter us with his presence. The word used for shelter is tent, or tabernacle. God will in eternity spread his tent over the victorious church, to protect us forever.

But this eternal blessing for us is not just our future hope... we know that our Lord Jesus Christ already makes us experience a foretaste of his

perfect presence, even today. He is so close to you...

Another reminder of Israel's trip through the desert is that the sun and the moon will not hurt God's people anymore. The heat of the march through the desert of this world will one day be over... In eternity we suffer no more misery, but even today – God is here to protect us and to be with us.

And before the throne of God, they will not hunger and thirst anymore. During Israel's pilgrimage through the desert, God supplied in the needs of his people, but when they came to the Promised Land, they had found in great abundance. John shows us that in heaven, all hunger and thirst are gone forever.

Tyconius, an African church leader of the 4th century, said about this:

They will not hunger because they are fed by the living bread. Jesus said: 'I am the living bread who comes down from heaven.' Nor will they thirst for they will drink from a cup so excellent that it will be for them, whoever believes in me shall never thirst. (Tyconius, Commentary on Apocalypse 7:16)

Jesus himself, the Lamb of God, ensures that before the throne all are eternally satisfied. We will have no more needs. But what He does eternally, he does today as well. He feeds us his body and blood for forgiveness and for strengthening us; he makes us satisfied, even today.

In Acts 14:22 we read that we must enter the kingdom of God through many tribulations. There is no escaping to it. Life is a pilgrimage and it can be tough. But we know our destiny – A fantastic future waits for us.

The apostle Paul says in Gal 6:9: "Brothers let us not grow weary for in due time we shall reap." Be encouraged. Do not become tired. Hold on to following your Lord. In eternity, He will take care of you, of all of you. As today we already know that his caring arms are under us. Praise the Lord.

And let us today do what we know we will also do in eternity: we will be a community from all nations that praises God and the Lamb...

Let us sing together, and then use our time of prayer to praise Him, instead of focussing on our needs. He will take care of those. Let us give all praise to God!

Amen