

Great crowd before the throne

Rev 7.9-17

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Long ago I used to be a journalist for Dutch national radio - Radio 1. It struck me then and it still strikes me today that when it comes to journalism and news reporting, a lot of time is spend not on what has happened, but on what impact this might have on the future.

All of us are infatuated with the future. We work for later, we worry about tomorrow, we are afraid of the direction of our society, we worry about climate change.

And there is logic to our urge to know the future. It is like when you drive your car. If you do not know where you are going, you cannot drive or you end up nowhere.

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

This is the search of all humankind, and the core issue of religion as well. Where do we come from, where do we go to. And therefore, who are we... and how shall we live today.

St John got a magnificent view of heaven. He sees the future of mankind – and this vision of John helps us understand who we are, where we are going, and how to live today.

1. New Humanity: one people praising God

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 has finally ended.

God began this process of creating a new mankind with Abraham - he was to be a blessing for all nations. It became truly serious at Pentecost, when people from all nations and languages began to follow Jesus Christ.

God gave his Spirit to his people with Pentecost, and since then, people in his church are moved inwardly by the Spirit of God, to no longer be disunited, to not war, to live to the glory 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, The UK, Holland, from Syria, Iran, from the USA, all worshipping God in unity.

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

These images from Revelation 7 paint before us the end-goal of history.

One of the heavenly beings asks John, 'do you know who these people are?' John does not know so the angel tells him:

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.

So who are these people?

John wrote his book of Revelation in a time of persecution. All over the Roman Empire the Christians faced big problems. John himself was banned to the Island of Patmos. 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.

From the perspective of the world, these people were true losers.



But from the perspective of heaven – these people stand before the throne of God. And that's a very different viewpoint!

This vision that John received, was to encourage us to look at ourselves and 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. But 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, then 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 Christians, you and I included, end up before God.

2. Unimaginable future

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!

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)

Glory, wisdom, honour, power, all that belongs to God.

But those persecuted Christians that John was addressing, 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. Let me quote from an ancient commentary from the sixth century on the book of Revelation, by a church father Primasius, from North Africa. He wrote:

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.

What God truly owns in his inner nature, honour, might, glory, is granted to you. Because the Spirit of God lies in 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 sons of God as well, through Jesus.

We are family with God, in a way. And what a destiny to look forward to! But this destiny is already ours – even today. Because today we are children of God. You are awesome! Even today!

3. Unimaginable 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, through his Spirit, 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 today, already today rejoice in his victory, even though our lives are far from perfect and not all is 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.

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 of Israel 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. John shows us that in heaven, all hunger and thirst are gone forever.

But today God also supplies in your needs. He knows what you need, and he sustains you. Because today you are connected with Jesus Christ, and today He lives in you through his Spirit.

Conclusion

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 with his body and his blood for forgiveness and for strengthening us; he makes us satisfied, even today.

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

The same apostle Paul says in Gal 6, "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 united community from all nations that loves and serves God and the Lamb. Today we are called to do just that: to live together in love and harmony, and to praise our Lord.

+Amen