

# living in **HOPE** of what's to come

Revelation 7:9-13

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Wouldn't it be nice if life were perfect? Ever notice that life isn't perfect? Sometimes things are so bad we're tempted to lose all hope. As one person put it, "There was a time in life when I had lost all hope. I endured failure on many fronts in a short period, causing an immense amount of pain. I had failed in marriage, business, and in life in general. I thought it signaled the beginning of the end. And I just didn't feel like going on."

Ever feel that way? It happens all the time, both in big ways and in small. In today's world, we've been told, marketed to, that life ought to be what? Perfect. A perfect childhood. A perfect home. A perfect family. The perfect job. The perfect spouse. Perfect children. The perfect body, free of aches and pains. Perfect health. Perfect relationships. Perfect weather. Perfect happiness. Heaven on earth!

Good luck, it ain't gonna happen. Not in *this* world. Not in *this* lifetime. Not on *this* side of eternity. If you're hoping everything will be perfect in your life, what are you doing? You're setting yourself up to be perfectly disappointed. And when all your hopes are dashed, where will you be? Where will that leave you?

Hope. We can't live very long without it. Why do you work hard in school? Why do you practice in sports? Why do you ask someone out on a date? Why do you get married? Why do you go to work? Why do you exercise? Without hope, what would be your motivation for all these things? Without hope, how could you go on?

The book of Revelation is written to people in desperate need of what? Hope. Like us, they were living in an imperfect world. And especially, as followers of Jesus, they were living in a world that opposed them, where they were hated and mistreated. Losing their homes and earthly possessions. Being fired from their places of employment. Being discriminated against. Pressured to keep quiet, or renounce their faith. More and more, becoming what? Outcasts in their own communities. Even tortured, mistreated, killed.

How could they go on? How could anyone? How could we? What did they have to look forward to? Why get up in the morning? Why go to work? Why keep on going? Have you ever asked yourself that? God, through the Apostle John, is given a vision. A picture of what was yet to come. A reason to go on. A reason to get up in the morning. In a hopelessly imperfect world, *hope* of better things to come.

*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. ... 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. ... Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst.*

*The sun will not beat down on them, nor any scorching heat. 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. If you're a follower of Jesus, that's what's waiting for you. That's what you have to look forward to!*

John hears a number: 144,000. And he hears the roll call: 12,000 from every tribe of Israel. 12 x 12 x 10 x 10 x 10 in glorious *perfection!* An Israel, like there never was before, and never will be on this earth. God's Israel, His chosen people, His holy nation, His royal priesthood.

Having heard the perfect number, John then looks, and he sees a great multitude, so large, no one could count, in all their diversity - from every nation, every tribe, every people, every language. Their Babel divisions are finally ended. They're finally, one people, under one God. They wear white robes, the sign of their purity. "*As many of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ.*" (Gal 3) They are covered with Jesus and His perfect robe of righteousness. Behold, a vast multitude arrayed in white. Perfect!

What are they doing? They're waving palm branches, the way the Israelites did every year at the feast of Tabernacles, when they marched around the temple grounds waving palm branches to celebrate God's victory, and their homecoming. They're worshipping the slain Lamb, who lives. People ask, "What's heaven going to be like? What will we be doing for all eternity? The answer from Revelation is this: Worship. The way it was in the

beginning, before sin turned us inward, to worship ourselves. You might say that church is kind of preview, a *foretaste* of the feast to come.

John heard their liturgy. They praise Christ, and His Father, for saving them: "*Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.*" He alone is the Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep, for you and me.

The hosts of heaven all agree. What do they do? They fall down on their faces and add a thunderous "Amen!" together with a seven-fold doxology: "Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God for ever and ever. Amen."

The big question, the one pressing on John, is: "Who is this congregation, this crowd of white-robed worshippers? And where do they come from?" They are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. (William Cwirla)

They are Abel, murdered by his brother. Joseph, sold into slavery. Isaiah, who was sawed in half. Paul, who was stoned, beaten, ship-wrecked, and then beheaded. The early Christians who were burned at the stake or thrown to the beasts as entertainment. Christians today who are killed today simply because they won't deny Jesus and confess Mohammed. And you could fill in that list a hundred-fold, with people who lived long ago and people today. In this world, in this life, they *looked* anything but successful, anything but blessed. Some might even say they are cursed. (James Douthwaite)

John sees the entire company of believers as it was never seen on earth. He's seeing the triumphant side of the church. In the here and now, we see only the militant. On earth the church looks weak, the church looks divided, the church looks out of touch. On earth, the church's glory is *hidden*; hidden behind a cross.

On earth, the church's victory is a matter of *faith*. On earth, the church's only hope, is a crucified, risen, and reigning Lamb. But now, this white-robed bunch, who suffered so much, even the loss of their own lives, is face to face with the only thing that matters. In the end, the only hope there is ... the Lamb, at the center of the throne.

And we learn the *secret* of their purity. Their robes are washed in the Lamb's blood. The blood of Jesus Christ, cleanses us from all our sin – all our immorality, all our greed, all our pride, all our envy, all our murder, all our hatred, all our idolatry. All which comes out of our hearts.

And when we stand before the throne, we stand *not* on the basis of what we've done, but on the basis of what the Lamb has done - *His* perfect life, *His* perfect death. *His* resurrection to life. *All* for us.

The apostle John *knew* his people were going to *suffer* for the faith. He *knew* that many would die. He *knew* that those seven congregations under his oversight, didn't stand a *chance* against the forces that would be unleashed against them. But he *lived* in the *confidence* that the Lord was *with* them, always. And whether they *lived*, or died, they did so in the *confidence* that they would dwell in the Lord's house forever! (Cwirla)

John is given a vision, a picture, of what was *yet* to come, a *reason* to go on, a *reason* to get up in the morning. In a hopelessly *imperfect* world, *hope* of better things to come.

In Matthew 5, we hear Jesus saying the same thing. *And he ... taught them, saying: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. ... Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ... Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven ....*

**1 Peter 4:12** *Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. ... if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.*

What a scene! It will completely dwarf any great assembling of people that has ever taken place. "A great multitude, that no one could number." And from all over the world. From all of human history. All the believers from all the centuries, from Old Testament and New, Jews and Gentiles, everyone who has trusted in God's promise of sending a Savior. It will be the greatest celebration that has ever occurred, for the greatest victory that has ever been won! (Charles Henrickson)

That's your future, in Jesus. No matter how bad things may get, no matter how many tears and how much blood is shed, no matter how much we may hunger and thirst, no matter how *imperfect* life is on *this* side of eternity, we live in hope, hope of what's coming. For now, what do we do? We trust. We take the Lamb at His Word. We hear His voice, and follow Him, through an imperfect world of suffering and death, to life that has no end. (Cwirla)

How did Jesus say it? *"In this world, you will have ... trouble."* *"But ... take heart, [have hope] I have overcome this world!"*

Halloween. Hallowed Eve. The eve of All Saints Day, " ... *in memory of those who have already finished their course, and for the exercising and preparation of those yet to walk in their steps*".

In this imperfect world of sin, and suffering, and injustice, there is One who is with us. We're not spared tribulation. We go through it, together with Jesus. And with Him, we come out of it.

Romans 8:16 *The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs - heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.*

18 *For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ... 23 And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in this hope we were saved.*

In many ways, All Saints Day is one of the most beautiful observances of the church year because it reminds us of our connectedness to those who have gone before us in the faith. There is, after-all, only one Church, composed of those living and dead.

We all gather before the throne of God to sing our endless praise for the victory He's given us in His life, death and resurrection. Indeed, we concur with St. John, who gives us the Revelation of glory this morning. *"Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."* (Alan Taylor)

Wouldn't it be nice if life were perfect? One day, it will be ... for those washed in the blood of the Lamb!

*"These in white robes - who are they, and where did they come from?" 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.*

*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. 'Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,' nor any scorching heat. 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.'"*