

The Blessed Saints!

Matthew 5:1-12, Revelation 7:9-17

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Hope. We can't live very well without it. Why do you get up in the morning? Why do you work hard in school or at work? Why do you exercise? Why do you ask someone out on a date? Why do you get married? Without hope, what would be the point of doing all these things; for doing anything? Without hope, how could you go on?

The book of Revelation is written to people in need of hope. As followers of Jesus, they were living in a world that opposed them. A world that hated them. A world that mistreated them. Losing their homes. Losing their possessions. Being fired from their jobs. Pressured to keep quiet. Pressured to renounce their faith. More and more, treated as outcasts. Even tortured and killed.

How could they go on? How could anyone go on under such circumstances? How could we? What did these followers of Jesus have to look forward to? Why get up in the morning? Why go to work? Why keep on going? The Apostle John, is given a vision. A vision of hope. A reason to go on. And not just go on. A reason to rejoice!

Revelation 7:9 *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 *you* have to look forward to! That's your hope. That's your joy in what lies ahead!

John hears something. It's a number. "144,000." And then, he hears the roll call: 12,000 from every tribe of Israel. 12 x 12 x 10 x 10 x 10. Glorious perfection! Completion. An Israel, like there never was before, and never will be on this earth. God's Israel. His believing ones. His people. The complete number of all of them. "*Hogios.*" Saints. His set apart ones.

Having heard the perfect number, John then looks. And when he looks, what does he see? He sees this great crowd. A multitude. How great? So great, that no one can count them. And this great multitude is diverse. As diverse as you can get. From every nation. From every tribe. From every people. From every language. Diverse to the extreme. Diverse, yet united. United in Christ. Saints. One people, under one God.

And what is this great multitude wearing? They're all dressed exactly the same. They're all wearing what saints wear. **Galatians 3:27** *"As many of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ."* Jesus is their covering; their righteousness. Behold! A vast multitude, decked out in sparkling white!

And what are these saints, robed in the righteousness of Christ, up to? 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; to celebrate their homecoming. These saints, all white and glimmering, are worshipping the slain Lamb, who lives.

We wonder, "What's heaven going to be like? What will we be doing for all eternity? We'll be turning outward, away from ourselves, worshipping God, the way it was, in the beginning, before sin turned us inward, to worship ourselves. And so, as we gather together in worship each Sunday, it's a preview. A *foretaste*, of what's to come! Church every day. Lives centered on Christ.

John hears the liturgy of these glimmering white saints waving their palm branches. They're praising Jesus and His Father, for saving them from eternal suffering in hell: "*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 all. For you. For me.

And the hosts of heaven all agree. What are they doing? They're falling down on their faces, adding 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?" Who is this congregation, this great crowd of white-robed worshippers? Where did 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 two. The Apostle Paul, who was stoned, beaten, ship-wrecked, and finally, beheaded. Who are these white-robed worshippers coming out of the great tribulation? They're the early Christians who were burned at the stake; thrown to the beasts as entertainment.

They're Christians today, who are killed, simply because they won't turn their backs on Jesus and confess Mohammed. And you could fill in the list a hundred-fold, with people who lived long ago, and people today, and in the future. In this world, in this life, they *look* anything but successful. They look anything but blessed. Some might even say they are cursed. (James Douthwaite)

The Apostle John sees the entire company of saints, of believers, as it's never seen on earth. He's seeing the *triumphant* side of the church. In the here and now, we see only, what's known as - the church *militant*. The church at war. Beaten and battered. War-torn. Here on earth, that's what the church looks like. It looks weak. It looks divided. It looks out of touch. On earth, the church's glory is *hidden*. Hidden, behind a cross. Hidden, under suffering.

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.

The blood of Jesus, shed for us, shed instead of ours, cleanses us from all our sin. Cleansed, of all our immorality. Cleansed, of all our greed. Cleansed, of all our pride. Cleansed, of all our envy. Cleansed, of all our murder. Cleansed, of all our hatred. Cleansed, of all our self-centeredness. Cleansed, of all our idolatry. Cleansed, of all which comes out of our hearts. And when we stand before the throne, we stand cleansed. Sparkling white! Clothed in Jesus' righteousness. *Hogios*. Holy. Saints.

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! Whether it looked like it or not. And whether these saints 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 ...*

"A great multitude, that no one can count!" Saints. Sparkling white, pure and holy. Forgiven. Victorious. Turning outward, worshipping the Lamb, with great thankfulness and joy! 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 trusts in God's promise of the Savior, God giving His life for them! (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 hopeless life may get on *this* side of eternity, we are blessed. And we live in that blessed hope. Hope in the Lamb. Looking forward to what's coming; to *Who* is coming! For now, what do we do? We trust. We take the Lamb at His Word. We hear His voice, and follow Him, through a world of suffering and death, to a life that has no end. (Cwirla)

"Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."