

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

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THE GREAT MULTITUDE

Most of you have heard the expression: "He is so heavenly-minded he is no earthly good!" Well, I have yet to meet anyone who fits that description. We are told by the Apostle Paul that our citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20, 21). Our bodies may be on earth, our destiny is heaven. Elsewhere Paul exhorts believers to set their hearts and minds on things in heaven where Christ is (Colossians 3:1-3). The Apostle Peter likewise reminds his readers that they have a heavenly hope, an inheritance that is imperishable (1 Peter 1:3-4). "It is to life after death that man looks when he begins to consider the nature of life and destiny. His question is always, *What is that life like?* Man's dreams of what that life will be like have often gone far beyond that which is given by revelation from God. Christians look with disfavor on the sensual views of future survival in some religious systems, but at the same time many so-called Christian concepts come close to that same sensual idea. Islam looks upon man's future life as one in which he shall be married to large-eyed maidens and shall drink of a wine which results neither in headache nor dimmed wits. There are times when a Christian's description of his idea of heaven would be much like that. Knowledge of life after death must be derived from the New Testament. What then may be known about that life? What is the place of the eternal home of the righteous? In contrast to that of the wicked, the righteous are spoken of as being with God, or in a relationship of blessedness and fellowship with God. Jesus appeared to have this in mind when he spoke of Lazarus as being *in Abraham's bosom* (Luke 16:19-31). Surely it was something of this that Jesus had in mind when he said in Matthew 25:21, *Enter into the joy of your Lord* and in Matthew 25:34, *Inherit the kingdom of my Father*. Some of the blessedness of that idea is represented, too, in Jesus' statement in John 17:24, *You may be with me where I am*. Paul, in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, spoke of this being with the Lord as the destiny of the Lord's people beyond the second coming. He no longer saw two groups – the living and the dead – waiting for that glorious event but one raised and transformed group eternally in the Lord's presence. In 1 Corinthians 5:8 he voiced his assurance that to depart this life was to be at home with the Lord and expressed the same confidence in Philippians 1:23 when as a prisoner he spoke of death as a departure to be with Christ. All of this seems sufficient representation of the idea which is found throughout the New Testament that beyond this life the righteous shall live in a state of unhindered and uninterrupted fellowship with their Lord."¹

- I. **THE UNNUMBERED HEAVENLY GATHERING.** "The international multitude gathers to celebrate a triumphant king. The palm branches in their hands (Rev. 7:9) are props in the ancient world's choreography of praise, as they were when a crowd welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem with the shout, *Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel* (John 12:13). The white-robed worshipers now lead the heavenly assembly into a new dimension of praise. This is the *first time* that we hear the church sing to its Sovereign, so it is fitting that this assembly of purchased, purified peoples (Rev. 5:9; 7:9, 14) introduces a new theme to the divine excellencies that were celebrated in

Revelation 4-5: *Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb* (7:10). The church's praise is answered by the chorus of angels, elders, and living creatures in a sevenfold doxology, which virtually replicates the earlier sevenfold praise of the Lamb, with one substitution: in place of *wealth* (5:12), our God now receives *thanksgiving*, his creatures' fitting response to his saving grace (7:12). The elder shows John the safety of this multitude (Rev. 7:15-17) in imagery drawn from Isaiah 49:10: *They will not hunger or thirst, nor will the scorching heat or sun strike them down; for He who has compassion on them will lead them and will guide them to springs of water*. In Isaiah's prophecy God is the Shepherd who leads his flock to springs of water (cf. Ps. 23:1-2; Ezek. 34:13). In Revelation the Lamb is *their shepherd* (cf. John 10; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:4). This is fitting, since he is *in the center of the throne* and with the Father receives worship from all creatures everywhere (Rev. 5:13-14). To shelter his flock from sun and heat their Protector *will spread His tabernacle [skēnoō] over them* (5:15; cf. Ezek. 37:27), and he *will wipe every tear from their eyes* (Rev. 5:17; cf. Isa. 25:8). These victors already taste the joys of the new Jerusalem, where God will *dwell [skēnoō] among his people, wipe every tear from their eyes, and cause them to drink of the water of life* (Rev. 21:3-4; 22:1)."²

II. **HEAVENLY WORSHIP.** William Perkins, one of the great Puritan preachers, noted, "The manner of performing this service is to worship God by God Himself immediately. In heaven, there shall neither be temple, ceremony, nor sacrament, but all these wants shall God Himself supply together with the Lamb – that is, Christ. *I saw no temple therein, for the Lord God Almighty, and the Lamb, are the temple of it* (21:22). This service shall be daily and without intermission. *They are in the presence of the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple* (Rev. 7:15)."³ A recent writer points out, "People of the world are always striving to celebrate – they just lack ultimate *reasons* to celebrate (and therefore find lesser reasons). As Christians, we have those reasons – our relationship with Jesus and the promise of Heaven. *Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God* (Revelation 21:3). Does this excite you? If it doesn't, you're not thinking correctly. I find it ironic that many people stereotype life in Heaven as an interminable church service. Apparently, church attendance has become synonymous with boredom. Yet meeting God – when it truly happens – will be far more exhilarating than a great meal, a poker game, hunting, gardening, mountain climbing, or watching the Super Bowl. Even if it were true (it isn't) that church services must be dull, *there will be no church services in Heaven*. The church (Christ's people) will be there. But there will be no temple, and as far as we know, no services (Revelation 21:22). Will we always be engaged in worship? Yes and no. If we have a narrow view of worship, the answer is no. But if we have a broad view of worship, the answer is yes. As Cornelius Venema explains, worship in Heaven will be all-encompassing: 'No legitimate activity of life – whether in marriage, family, business, play, friendship, education, politics, etc. – escapes the claims of Christ's kingship. . . . Certainly those who live and reign with Christ forever will find the diversity and complexity of their worship of God not less, but richer, in the life to come. Every legitimate activity of new creaturely life will be included within the life of worship of God's people.'"⁴

III. **THE IDENTITY OF THIS GREAT MULTITUDE.** John is told that these have come and of the great tribulation. "Holding palm branches as a sign of joyous celebration (cf. John 12:13), they praise God, whose salvation they have received. As in the scene pictured in 4:1-5:14, many beings join in the praise. The victors, the whole people of God, *have come out of the great tribulation* (v. 14). Many identify the great tribulation with a final period of persecution shortly before the Second Coming. But tribulations for Christians occur throughout the church age, so that the whole age can be characterized as one of tribulation

(2 Thess. 1:5-6; 2 Tim. 3:1, 12). Thus, this passage provides comfort to first-century Christians as well as to those in the final crisis (see 11:2). The white robes of purity and honor belong to the multitude, not because of anything that they have achieved through their own power, but through the power of Christ's redemption. In a startling juxtaposition, his blood washes them white (cf. Zech. 13:1; Isa. 4:4; Heb. 9:14; 1 John 1:7). The victorious saints appear before God to enjoy his presence in blissful peace and comfort (vv. 15-17). At the heart of blessing is the presence of God and the Lamb, and their care for the saints. The picture here anticipates the final peace of 21:1-4; 22:1-5. Since 6:12-17 has already taken us up to the Second Coming, the next event would be the appearing of the new Jerusalem and its blessings. But Revelation is not ready at this early point in its dramatic development to expose fully God's plans for the new world. At this point, it suffices that the saints receive his promise in general terms."⁵

CONCLUSION. Sam Storms says that "As I read vv. 15-17 I see no fewer than eight blessings that we will experience in heaven. (1) The first one is that we will stand *before the throne of God* (v. 15a). Whether we will be able to stand upright for very long is doubtful. My guess is that we, like the 24 Elders before us, will fall on our faces in adoration and joy and love and gratitude. (2) Second, we will have the pleasure of serving him *day and night in his temple* (v. 15b). Our service will not be to shore up any weakness in God or to perform tasks that he's too tired to get done on his own. Our service is that of worship and praise. The word translated *serve* is not the ordinary Greek word that means to do work for someone or to come to their aid. It is the word that refers to sacred service in the temple of lifting up prayers and praise. And notice that it will be endless: *day and night!* (3) Then we are told that God *will shelter us with his presence* (v. 15c). The word *shelter* literally means he will set his tabernacle over us. This is a clear allusion to Ezekiel 37:26-28, a passage that in its OT context is a prophecy of Israel's restoration. There God says, *I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forever. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.* You won't need a home or a tornado shelter or a mansion of any sort to keep you safe. God's very personal presence will be your shelter! You and I will quite literally live in, with, and under him in all his glory! (4) The fourth, (5) fifth, (6) sixth, and (7) seventh blessings are all drawn from Isaiah 49:10, yet another text that refers to the results of Israel's restoration: *They shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them [or be their shepherd]* (Isa. 49:10). What does he mean by all this? This is the prophet's way of summarizing every form of physical harm or deprivation or suffering that we might endure in this life. And God will guarantee that no such harm or pain or loss will ever be experienced by his people in the new heavens and new earth! They shall not hunger or thirst, which is to say that *whatever your deepest desires may be, he will fulfill them; whatever it takes to fill you and satisfy you and bring you greatest happiness, he will provide.* (8) As if that were not enough, another prophetic promise tied to Israel's restoration is appended to this list of blessings now applied to the church. In Isaiah 25:8 the prophet declared that *God will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth.* There seems to be no escaping the fact that John sees the OT hope of Israel's restoration and all its attendant blessings fulfilled in the salvation of the Christian multitudes who comprise the church, both believing Jews and Gentiles. Is there any practical benefit in thinking on these things? Does it help you face today's loss and tomorrow's pain? O, my Yes. A thousand times, Yes!"⁶

ENDNOTES

¹Ray Summers, *The Life Beyond* (Broadman Press, 1959), p. 196.

²D. E. Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (P&R, 2001), p. 134.

³*The Works of William Perkins VI* (rpt. Reformation Heritage Books, 2020), p. 218.

⁴Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Tyndale, 2004), p. 188.

⁵V. S. Poythress, *The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation* (P&R, 2000), p. 119.

⁶S. Storms, *When We've Been There Ten Thousand Years! Revelation 7:9-17* (Bridgeway Church OKC #19), 2021.