

The Great Multitude

Revelation 7:9-17

Have you ever been in a large crowd? Some of you have, just yesterday, at Jack Trice Stadium, cheering on the Cyclones. While the enthusiasm isn't there as much as it would be if they had kept winning after the great start to the season, there is still a large crowd. Hilton may not hold as many people, but it still gets packed to the rafters for basketball games.

While the stadium personnel may be able to keep an accurate count of the people, that's only because of counting things like ticket scans or knowing how many sections there are. If you tried to count one by one, you'd eventually lose count. You might just end up saying there is a great multitude.

It's not just sporting events that have large numbers of people. Different rallies try to count people so they can measure their impact. The No Kings protests a couple of weeks ago claimed to have nearly seven million people across the country. Years ago, the Million Man March didn't quite reach that goal, but was still memorable. Rallies for and against President Trump, the annual March for Life, anti-gun March for our Lives, and more all want to show people coming together to support their cause. We all want to be a part of something greater than ourselves, with other people around us a part of the same thing.

That seems to be what happens in today's reading from Revelation. John describes a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, clothed in white robes. They're not all wearing white because it's a white out in heaven, like there was at Jack Trice a few weeks ago. Their robes are white because of the blood of the Lamb, because of the redemptive

work of Jesus on the cross. Because of the grace of God, they have been made clean. This picture of heaven shows us that God's grace, God's redemptive work, is not based on anything but the work of Jesus. We celebrate saints today not because what they did made them holy, but because of what Jesus did made them holy.

While the book of Revelation can have a bad reputation for its confusing and frightening imagery, it's actually a picture of hope. It was written not to discourage the Christians living under the threat of persecution at the end of the first century, but to encourage them. If they knew the ending, if they knew how things would turn out, they would be able to face even great tribulation.

The Great Tribulation is not what we went through during the pandemic. It's not some fanciful period of persecution that happens right before Jesus returns. It's not a 3-game losing streak or a playoff drought. It's not even limited to the suffering endured by the Christians John wrote the book of Revelation to. It means the suffering through which the children of God in all ages pass before they enter into the eternal kingdom of God.

Since every Christian experiences tests of faith and witness, every such trial points to the future great tribulation. The picture of eternal glory of Revelation 7 is for the comfort of all Christians of all times as they experience whatever tribulations test their faith and patience. That is the picture of heaven. That is what we are to think of when we go through our own times of trials and tribulations. Just as these ordinary people in the great multitude, unknown to us but known to God, from every

nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, are saved by the blood of Jesus and brought together in their common faith, so we, too, are saved by the blood of Jesus and brought together in our common faith. It is a source of great encouragement when we need to be encouraged. We are a part of something greater than ourselves, something bigger than ourselves. We are a part of the family of God, the church.

The church has always believed that God is speaking to us through Revelation. But what God is telling us about is not the future but the present. In all ages, the church has experienced opposition and persecution, and in all ages, martyrs were willing to witness in difficult circumstances to the truth of the Gospel. Revelation is written not only to encourage us to endure in times of persecution and trouble, but also to show us there is a deeper reality that is happening right now!

Here is a mass gathering which includes a crowd transfixed from either side of the grave. Angels and archangels and all the company of heaven include all the saints. We believe that when we take communion, we are doing it not only with everyone who is here, but also with everyone Jesus loves who has gone before us. It's so amazing that it's hard to imagine! Which is why the ancient church used to make altar railings in half-circles, and they did it because they said that those other people who have gone before us, complete the circle on the other side. It's a huge symbol of what we call 'the communion of saints,' So every time we gather up here, we believe we're gathering with all sorts of people past, present, and future.

It is also worth mentioning that such mass gatherings would not have been foreign to John and his audience. They would have known them from the imperial shows of power coming

from Rome, the Caesar making sure his spectacle of domination would bring all under his authority to fall on their faces before his throne, in dread, fear, and terror. Bread and circuses served to entertain the masses and distract them from the problems they had. But the gathering of the great multitude isn't a distraction. It's a celebration.

We know we face challenges in our lives. Economic uncertainty, sickness, war, and natural disasters fill the news, in addition to whatever challenges we have that are uniquely our own. Even as we come out of whatever the latest "great ordeal" might be, we know there are ordeals yet to come this side of heaven. Nevertheless, we gather and join in the great multitude because the Lamb is at its center, and the Lamb's Kingdom ushers in the peaceable eternity of life resurrected. There is no fear here, nor any terror. We worship in sheer gratitude and praise, knowing that peace will come.

We glimpse a multitude of saints singing in every language--what a beautiful vision of belonging! John knew what it was like to not belong. Although he grew up in Israel and followed Jesus as one of his disciples, he writes Revelation while he is in exile on the island of Patmos, off the coast of modern-day Turkey. John may have been a recent refugee to Asia Minor from Palestine following the trauma of the Roman-Jewish War. John's dual identity as a Jew writing to Greek-speaking people in Asia Minor, in a land and language not his own, places him in a situation similar to people with hybrid identities today, and made him sure to remind his hearers that the great multitude included people from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.

The saints are unified by their love for the crucified Lamb of God. With one voice they

join in singing before God's throne. Yet they have not always been standing here experiencing this joy. They have suffered through an ordeal. They know what it's like to be in want, to hunger and thirst. But God has brought them through all of it. And their story isn't over yet. Their belonging will take a new form as the crucified and risen Lamb becomes their Shepherd. He will guide them to springs of the water of life. Like the saints of the past, we continue to sing in order to witness to the great and glorious things our God has done for us. We sing because we belong to this multitude of saints. We sing in anticipation of the joy that is yet to come. We sing because we're saints, part of the great multitude.

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