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Sermon Summary #19

When we've been there Ten Thousand Years! Revelation 7:9-17

It has always struck me as bizarre that some Christians, or at least those who profess to be Christians, don't think it is spiritually beneficial or helpful or encouraging to think about heaven. Many of them have bought into the old saying that such people are "so heavenly minded they're of no earthly good." Yes, I have known a few people along the way who have used the promise of heaven's blessings as an excuse for neglecting earthly responsibilities. Some seem to think that their primary task is to meditate on the age to come and it leaves them no time to get a job or mow the grass or take a meal to a bed-ridden neighbor. I have no patience for people like that. But I still believe that meditating on the life to come and developing a healthy obsession for the blessings that God has in store for us is of immense practical benefit for how we live now. *I am persuaded that we must take steps to cultivate and intensify in our souls an ache for the beauty and blessings of the age to come.*

The consistent witness of Scripture is that we should make heaven and its beauty the object of our contemplative energy, not for the purpose of fueling theological speculation, but to equip us for life here and now. Evidently there is something about heaven that makes our anticipation of its experience profoundly life-changing. And the reason isn't hard to discern. *The essence of heaven is the vision of God and the eternal increase of joy in him.* Heaven might well be summed up in the declaration: *"They will see his face"* (Rev. 22:4)!

Why Think About Heaven?

So why should we think about heaven? Why should we bother with a passage like Revelation 7:9-17 that quite clearly describes the incredible experience of God's people in the new heavens and new earth in eternity future? Before I delve into the nature of this passage, consider the immediate and practical impact of the soul's intense longing for it.

First, setting our hearts on the blessings and joys of heaven frees us from excessive dependence upon earthly wealth and comfort. If there awaits us an eternal inheritance of immeasurable glory, an experience like that portrayed in these verses, it makes no sense to expend effort and energy here, sacrificing so much time and money, to obtain for so brief a time in corruptible form what we will enjoy forever in consummate perfection.

The Apostle Paul made this point in Philippians 3:20-21. "Our citizenship," says Paul, "is in heaven" (3:20a). He reminds the Philippians of this because knowing it to be true enables the soul to escape the grip of "earthly things" (Phil. 3:19) and to "stand firm" (Phil. 4:1). Paul in no way denies or minimizes the reality of our earthly obligations. He reminds the Philippians that their bodies were in Philippi. Their names were enrolled as Roman citizens. They had voting rights. They owed their taxes to an earthly king. They were protected by the laws of a this-worldly state. And the same could be said of you and me and all who live in the United States.

Yet their fundamental identity, ours as well, the orientation of their souls, the affection of their hearts, and the focus of their minds was *in heaven!* Paul appeals to their patriotic pride, not in Philippi, but in the New Jerusalem, their real residence! Therefore, be governed by *its* rules, *its* principles, *its* values. Paul is careful to insist that our citizenship "is" (present tense) in heaven, not "will be". We are *already* citizens of a new state. We are resident aliens here on earth.

Peter said much the same thing in his first epistle. There he contends that the ultimate purpose of the new birth (1 Peter 1:3-4) is our experience of a *heavenly* hope, an inheritance that is "imperishable," by which he means incorruptible, not subject to decay or rust or mold or dissolution or disintegration. This heavenly inheritance is "undefiled" or pure, unmixed, untainted by sin or evil. Best of all, it is "unfading." Not only will it never end, it will never diminish in its capacity to enthrall and fascinate and impart joy. It is "reserved in heaven" for us, kept safe,

under guard, protected and insulated against all intrusion or violation. This hope is the grounds for your joy (v. 6) that sustains you in trial and suffering.

A few verses later Peter exhorts his readers to “set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:13). This is a **commanded obsession**. Fixate fully! Rivet your soul on the grace that you will receive when Christ returns. Tolerate no distractions. Entertain no diversions. Don’t let your mind be swayed. Devote every ounce of mental and spiritual and emotional energy to concentrating and contemplating on the grace that is to come.

The author of the book of Hebrews echoes this emphasis. He tells us that the expectation of a “city that has foundations” energized Abraham’s heart to persevere in a foreign land. All the patriarchs are described as “seeking a [heavenly] homeland” (Hebrews 11:14). Their determination in the face of trial was fueled by their desire for a “better country, that is, a heavenly one” (Hebrews 11:16). As pleasant as it may be now, what we see and sense and savor in this life is an ephemeral shadow compared with the substance of God himself. **Earthly joys are fragmented beams, but God is the sun. Earthly refreshment is at best a sipping from intermittent springs, but God is the ocean!**

Here is a **second** reason why thinking about the blessings of eternal life in the future is so helpful. A contemplative focus on heaven enables us to respond appropriately to the injustices of this life. Essential to heavenly joy is witnessing the vindication of righteousness and the judgment of evil. Only from our anticipation of the new perspective of heaven, from which we, one day, will look back and evaluate what now seems senseless, can we be empowered to endure this world in all its ugliness and moral deformity.

Apart from a contemplative fixation on the glories of heaven, you will always struggle to read the newspaper righteously! If you insist on taking the short view of things you will be forever frustrated, confused, and angry.

We will see this principle later in our study of Revelation when we come to chapter nineteen, verses one through eight. There we read of the perspective of those surrounding the heavenly throne of God. Their declaration of praise is in response to the judgment on Babylon described in Revelation 18. God is to be praised and all power and glory ascribed to him precisely because he has “judged the great harlot” (Rev. 19:2). Far from the outpouring of wrath and the destruction of his enemies being a blight on God’s character or a reason to question his love and kindness (as unbelievers so often suggest), they are the very reason for worship! God’s judgments against the unbelieving world system and its followers are “true and righteous” (see 15:3-4 and 16:5-7), for the harlot was corrupting (cf. 17:1-5; 18:3,7-9) the earth with her immorality, thereby meriting divine vengeance.

Would you like another, **third**, reason why it’s so important for us to spend time in Revelation 7:9-17? A contemplative focus on heaven produces the fruit of endurance and perseverance now. **The strength to endure present suffering is the fruit of meditating on future satisfaction!** This is the clear message of several texts such as Matthew 5:11-12; Romans 8:17-18,23,25b; Hebrews 13:13-14; and 1 Peter 1:3-8.

Romans 8:18 is Paul’s declaration that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” We do not lose heart because we contemplate the unseen things of the future and nourish our souls with the truth that whatever we endure on this earth is producing a glory far beyond all comparison! Christians are not asked to treat pain as though it were pleasure, or grief as though it were joy, but to bring all earthly adversity into comparison with heavenly glory and thereby be strengthened to endure. The exhortation in Hebrews 13:13-14 to willingly bear the reproach of Christ is grounded in the expectation of a “city which is to come,” namely, the heavenly New Jerusalem.

Nowhere is this principle better seen than in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. Gazing at the grandeur of heavenly glory transforms our value system. In the light of what is “eternal”, what we face now is only “momentary”. Suffering appears “prolonged” only in the absence of an eternal perspective. The “affliction” of this life is regarded as “light” when compared with the “weight” of that “glory” yet to come. It is “burdensome” only when we lose sight of our heavenly future. The key to success in suffering, as odd as that sounds, is in taking the long view. Only when juxtaposed with the endless ages of eternal bliss does suffering in this life become tolerable.

There is yet another contrast to be noted. In v. 18 Paul juxtaposes “transient” things “that are seen” with “eternal” things “that are unseen.” Paul says that our “inner nature” is being renewed *as we look* or *while we look* at the unseen,

eternal things of the age to come. If you don't "look" you won't change! The process of renewal only occurs *as the believer looks to things as yet unseen*. As we fix the gaze of our hearts on the glorious hope of the age to come, God progressively renews our inner being, notwithstanding the simultaneous decay of our outer frame! Inner renewal does not happen automatically or mechanically. Transformation happens only *as or provided that* we "look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen" (v. 18).

Heavenly Healing and Happiness

The way John begins his portrayal of the immeasurable greatness and glory of heaven is something we've already encountered in Revelation. Back in Revelation 5:9-14 we read about men and women from every tribe and people and language and nation encircling the throne of God and of the Lamb, Jesus Christ, singing their endless praises and adoration of the one who has saved us.

We also saw back in Revelation 4-5 the presence of millions and millions of angels, together with the 24 Elders and the four living creatures. They together fall on their faces and worship God, giving him all credit and praise for being who he is and doing what he has done.

Only the angels are described as "standing" (no angel in Revelation is described as seated). There was an ancient Jewish tradition, based on Ezekiel 1:7 ("and their legs were straight"), that angels always stood because they have no knees! Well, I don't know about that, but everyone else who has knees is bowing before our great Triune God!

The "great multitude" that John sees are precisely those in Revelation 5:9 whom Jesus redeemed "from every tribe and language and people and nation". The language John uses, "a great multitude, that no one could number," sounds remarkably similar to *the promise given to Abraham*. That promise consisted primarily of two elements.

First, Abraham was promised that he would have innumerable descendants, described as "the dust of the earth," "the stars of the sky," and "the sand of the sea" (Gen. 13:16; 15:5; 22:17-18). In Genesis 16:10 God said to Abraham: "I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude." This promise was repeated to Isaac (Gen. 26:4) and to Jacob (Gen. 28:14; 32:12), and is found in numerous other OT texts (Ex. 32:13; Deut. 1:10; 10:22; 28:62; 2 Sam. 17:11; 1 Kings 3:8; 4:20; Neh. 9:23; Isa. 10:22; 48:19; 51:2; Hosea 1:10).

Second, God promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations (Gen. 17:4-6, 16), a promise also repeated to Isaac and Jacob (Gen. 28:14; 32:12; 35:11; 48:19).

In these OT texts it is the physical progeny of Israel who are in view. But amazingly here in Revelation 7:9 it is the Church in whom those promises appear to be fulfilled. Verse 9a points to the fulfillment of the first promise above, while verse 9b points to the fulfillment of the second. It may well be, then, that ***John views the innumerable multitude of Revelation 7:9 as the consummate fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise***. And those who inherit these promises include all believing Jews, all those who have descended physically from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and have put their trust in Christ, as well as all believing Gentiles.

In v. 10 the saints attribute their "salvation" to God and to the Lamb. In Paul's writings this noun normally refers to deliverance from sin and guilt. In this context, however, something more may be in view. John is describing the preservation and protection of the saints in the midst of suffering. Their "sealing" is designed to safeguard their souls, lest they deny Jesus under the pressures of persecution. The focus of Revelation 7:9-17 is the heavenly reward for those who do, in fact, persevere. Therefore, it may be that by "salvation" John refers not only to the forgiveness of sins but also to their preservation in faith in the midst of trials.

One more comment is in order before we go any further. There has been a debate raging in the church for 2,000 years about whether the number of those who will be saved is small or large, or perhaps somewhere in between. Of course, those who call themselves *universalists* insist that every human being will ultimately be saved, regardless of whether or not they believe in Jesus or in any concept of God. Needless to say, this is profoundly unbiblical. It may even be heretical!

Others argue that the number of those who will finally be saved is very small. They appeal to the concept in Scripture of *the believing remnant*. The remnant is that small portion of the whole of mankind who truly trust Christ.

But perhaps the best and most biblical answer to this question is here in Revelation 7:9. John describes a “great multitude that no one could number.” That sure sounds to me like a whole bunch of people! I don’t know how many. I don’t know if this means the majority of people will ultimately be saved. What I do know is that it is far more than a tiny remnant. It is a multitude of men and women that is so great, so large, so numerous, that it was impossible for John to count them. They are “innumerable”!

A Rhetorical Question

I’m assuming you know what a rhetorical question is. It’s a question asked by someone who doesn’t want you to answer because they already know it. Here in vv. 13-14 one of the 24 Elders speaks to John and asks him: “Who is this ‘great multitude that no one can number?’ Where did they come from?” John responds by saying, “Uh, well, you tell me!”

The elder is only too happy to provide an answer: “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation” (v. 14b).

Now, let me say a few words about the “great tribulation.” This phrase also appears in our Lord’s Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24:21. There he is referring to the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, an expression of the judgment of God against Israel for its calloused rejection of the Messiah. Most of you have grown up thinking that the so-called “great tribulation” refers exclusively to a short period of time in the future immediately preceding the Second Coming of Jesus. That, I am forced to tell you, is yet another “sacred cow” that I must slay.

The first thing to remember is that in all likelihood the events that transpired in the first century, from 33-70 a.d. were a microcosmic foreshadowing of what happens on a macrocosmic scale throughout the present age. If that is true, and I suspect that it is, the use of such terminology here in Revelation 7 is understandable.

On the other hand, “tribulation” is nothing new or unexpected for Christians in any age. John’s presence on the island of Patmos is described as “tribulation” (1:9). Back in Revelation 2:9 Jesus said to the Christians in first-century Smyrna, “I know your tribulation.” Again in v. 10 he said, “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation” (Rev. 2:10). ***Tribulation is the normative experience for all believers***, as several texts indicate (John 16:33; Acts 14:22; Rom. 5:3; 8:35-36; 2 Tim. 3:12). In fact, 21 of Paul’s 23 uses of this term (*thlipsis*) refer to an on-going, present day experience of the Christian. The tribulation we suffer is “great” because of the intensity of opposition from the world and its god, the Devil.

In any case, nothing requires us to think of the “great tribulation” as a special period of time reserved exclusively for the end of the age through which only the last generation of believers might pass. ***All*** Christians in ***every*** age face the reality of what John describes. Yes, those who are alive just before the Second Coming of Jesus will endure “great tribulation” and persecution. But countless millions of Christians throughout church history already have. ***Tribulation is what characterizes this entire church age in which we live.***

There is nothing to indicate that *only* martyrs are in view here in chapter seven, only those who actually lost their lives because of their faith. If they are the focus of John’s comments, they could also serve to represent all believers who must suffer, whether or not they actually lose their lives. That “they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14) would mean that “despite resistance, they have continued believing in and testifying to the Lamb’s death on their behalf, which has taken their sin away and granted them salvation” (Beale, 436).

There may also be here an allusion to the Exodus event of the OT. More than allusion, it may be John’s way of saying that the Church is the true Israel in whom the OT exodus event finds its typological fulfillment. Consider these parallels: (1) a great multitude comes out of trial and tribulation (*thlipsis* is used in the LXX of Exodus 4:31 to describe Israel’s experience); (2) Israel is portrayed as washing their garments (Exodus 19:10,14) and (3) being sprinkled with blood (Ex. 24:8) to (4) prepare them for God’s tabernacling among them, (5) as a result of which they receive food, water, protection, and comfort.

Eternal Life in the Presence of God, the Lamb, and the Holy Spirit

Before I unpack these incredible blessings of heaven in God's presence, I want you to take note of a critically important word. It's actually two words in the Greek text that are translated as one word in English. It is the word **"therefore"** that opens v. 15. It is John's way of alerting us to the reason or cause or ground or basis on which these people are before the throne of God. It points us back to the last sentence in v. 14. In other words, the only reason why these people are before the throne of God and enjoy these remarkable blessings is because "they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

Stop for a moment and ask yourself this eternally important question. If you are confident that in eternity future you will stand joyfully "before the throne of God" and enjoy these incredible blessings, on what basis do you believe this? What is the ground for your hope? What is the cause that accounts for this? To what or to whom would you point and say: "That's why."

If your answer is: "It is because I've lived a fairly decent life on earth. I've done the very best I could. I tried to be a good father, mother, son, daughter, friend, and employee. I've been really sincere in my religious life. I attended church on a fairly regular basis. I was baptized and I partake of the Lord's Supper and I'm a covenant member of Bridgeway in OKC. Yeah, that's why I anticipate standing before the throne of God." If that is your answer, I pity you. More than that, I appeal to you to look at the reason John gives. The **only** reason anyone in any age or anywhere on earth can have hope of standing before the throne of God is because by God's grace alone, through faith alone, they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of Jesus. Have you? Well, have you?

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.

Conclusion

Is there any practical benefit in thinking on these things? Does it help you face today’s loss and tomorrow’s pain? Oh, my Yes! A thousand times, Yes!