The Great Multitude

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[0:00] Well, good morning and happy Feast of All Saints to you all. Love having family, all ages services, and especially if you're visiting, joining us for the first time.

! We're delighted that you're here. My name's Tommy, and I am glad to be together. And, you know, the other day I was on my computer doing work and I opened my photo app.
And I don't know if this has happened to you, but my photo app does this thing where pretty regularly it will show an old photograph as a memory. It'll be like, remember this when this happened, right?
And the photo that it showed was a picture of me with my grandfather, who I really loved and looked up to and respected. And my grandfather passed away some time ago. And just seeing that photo grab my heart.
You know, it's weird to see a photo of somebody that you really love who's passed away. You know, you're looking at that photo, and there they are smiling, and it's like you're going to see them tomorrow, you know.
[1:06] And yet you know that they've passed away. It's like for that moment, it's like they're still alive and you can almost feel their presence. And you can't help wondering in moments like that, I wonder where he is now.

You know, I wonder what he's experiencing now. I wonder, honestly, the question that always comes to my mind, I wonder if I'm ever going to see him again. And I'm sure that you have felt that. And it raises all these questions. And, you know, our kids and some of you kids who are here, at a very early age, our kids will start asking questions like that. You know, age three, four, they start wondering, what happens when we die?
Where do we go? What happens to the people that we say goodbye to? Will we ever see them again? And, you know, the Feast of All Saints is a very appropriate place to ask these kinds of questions.
What do we think about that? What do we believe about it? What hope does Christianity offer when it comes to questions about life after death? In Revelation chapter 7, it's as though God pulls back the veil briefly between heaven and earth and gives us a glimpse into that reality, into some of how Christianity would answer these questions.
[2:32] What exactly awaits those who die in Christ? And what does John see? So, this is a vision that God gives to the Apostle John. And what does John see when God pulls back that veil?

Well, he sees a few things. He sees a vast multitude of people, which completely shocks him. He sees that all of those people are dressed in white robes, which is a very powerful symbol, but also very confusing.
And then at the center of all, he sees a lamb. So, we have these three images, a great multitude, white robes, and a lamb. And taken together, when we understand what these images mean, they teach us everything about the hope that Christianity offers the world.
So, this is what we're going to look at. Please join me. We're going to pray, and then we're going to open God's Word together. Lord, we thank you for your Word. And we thank you for this gathering this morning.
And now, Lord, it's our desire that you would speak to us. And so, we pray that by the Holy Spirit, you would speak to us. I ask that you would bless us and do your work in us through your Word, as you promised to do.
[3:44] And we pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen. So, first, the multitude. Let me just read this to you. Listen to what John sees. I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, John emphasizes two things.

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First, the size of this multitude. It's more than anyone can count. And second, the absolute amazing diversity of this multitude.
It's astonishing diversity. People from every nation, tribe, people, and language. And what's amazing is that their differences haven't disappeared.
He's still able to recognize these are all different kinds of people, races and ethnicities and cultures and languages. They still have all of their distinctives. But what's different is that their divisions, their divisions have ceased.
So, just imagine standing in the midst of that multitude as John was able to do, this great mosaic of colors and cultures.
[5:05] People from every century of human history. People whose nations were enemies. People whose cultures had clashed.

People whose histories were marked by bloodshed. And yet here, they're standing shoulder to shoulder.
And they're all worshiping the same Lord. It's a beautiful image. What we need to understand is that this is actually the fulfillment of the promise that God gave to Abraham all the way back in the beginning of the Bible.
In Genesis chapter 12 and Genesis chapter 15, when God says, I'm going to bless you and I'm going to make of you a great nation. And through you, through your descendants, and particularly one descendant, it's singular, I'm going to bless all the families of the earth.
And he says, your descendants are going to be too numerous to count. They're going to be as many as there are stars or grains of sand. And John is seeing that that has been fulfilled. This great multitude.
[6:12] This is God's vision for humanity. From the very beginning, this is what God desired of us and for us. God's plan was always bigger than Israel.

It was always bigger than America. It was always bigger than the West. This faith and this hope is not the purview of one people, one race, one nation, one culture, or one language.
This hope was always meant to be shared with the world. And this is why those of us here who are Christians share our faith.
This is why we support and encourage missionaries, both here and abroad. And why we support missionaries to go all around the world. This is why that matters.
Some people get uncomfortable with the idea of sharing faith. And I get it. It's uncomfortable. It can be uncomfortable. The question I would ask, though, is if we really and truly believe that this is true, and that this is possible, why would we not want to share it?
[7:26] You know, it's like that quote from Penn Jillette, the famous magician. He's an atheist and a very well-known atheist, but he said this in an interview.

He said, you know, I don't respect people who don't proselytize. I don't respect that at all. If you believe in all this and you think that it's not really worth telling people because it would make it socially awkward, he says, how much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and to not tell them that?
This is hope that is meant for the world. This is what we see with this multitude. It shows us the scope of God's plan of salvation. But it raises another question.
How did these people get here? Appropriate for this morning, how did they become saints? How do you become a saint?
And this is where we have to understand the meaning of the white robes. A lot of times when people hear the word saint, talk about all saints, we think that a saint is simply just a word for a really good person, an exceptionally good person.
[8:39] And that is because we instinctively think of righteousness as something that we have to achieve through moral performance.

So people think, well, I think on average I'm a good person. I go to church. I read my Bible. I try to serve God and make a difference in my neighborhood.
I don't cheat on my taxes and I try to be nice to my neighbors. And surely that counts for something. This is what many other religions teach.
In one way or another, most religions teach a form of this. It is do these things in order to be considered good or good enough. And that is the way to be saved or to ascend or whatever the goal might be.

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The thing that we need to understand, it's abundantly clear in this passage, is that the gospel teaches something radically different. The gospel says first and foremost, we cannot save ourselves.
[9:48] We cannot save ourselves. It actually would go so far as to say we can't even live up to our own standards, much less God's standards.

We can't save ourselves. And so it raises this question, well, how does anyone become a saint? How do you get that white robe?
By the way, that's what this is meant to represent. And some people are like, why do the guys in that church wear dresses? Well, it's because we have this symbolic vestment that is meant to reflect this robe of a saint.
But it's something that every saint is able to wear, right? Why is that? How does one get such a white garment? Because it represents in the Bible absolute purity.
So how do you get it? Here's what it says in verse 13 and 14. Then one of the elders asked me, these in white robes, who are they?
[10:50] And where did they come from? He's trying to understand. How did they get here? Why are they wearing that? I answered, sir, you know. And he said, these are they who have come out of the great tribulation.

Now that's all of the suffering, including the suffering that we face right now. All of the things that make life hard, right? Sickness and illness and disease and all, sometimes persecution. And they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.
This is the answer to that question. How do you get that white robe? You have to be washed in the blood of the Lamb. And here's the hard part.
What this means is that we have to be willing to admit that we are moral failures. That's the hardest part. You have to be willing to admit, I am a moral failure.
And my only hope is the forgiveness that comes through the cross, where the Lamb shed His blood. That's the only hope I have. So you don't become a saint by being a good person.
[12:05] That's not the way to get there. You become a saint when you admit that you need to be washed in the blood of the Lamb. In fact, I would say perhaps one of the greatest obstacles to receiving God's grace is believing that you're already a good person.

That's one of the greatest obstacles. If you spend your whole life convincing yourself that you're a pretty good person and convincing the people around you that you're a pretty good person, the idea of admitting that you are a moral failure is almost unbearable.
And so a lot of times people don't even become open to the truth of the gospel until they go through some major falling out in their life. This is one of the reasons I think why so many people come to faith in prison.
There's not a lot of people in prison making their moral argument. You know what I mean? You're there and you realize, man, things have really gone wrong in my life and it opens you up to the possibility maybe I'm not the person I thought I was.
You have to know that Jesus is your only hope. And you know, no one understood this better than the thief on the cross next to Jesus.
[13:22] You know, when Jesus was crucified, there was a man crucified on either side of him. So there were three crosses. And one of the men is completely unrepentant and he's mocking Jesus and hurling insults at him.

But the other man is completely different. And that man simply does two things. He admits that he's getting the punishment he deserves.
I mean, he's a notorious criminal, potentially an insurrectionist. So he admits, yeah, I'm getting what I deserve. And he looks at Jesus and says, but this man's innocent. He hasn't done anything wrong.
And then he simply says this to Jesus. He says, remember me when you come into your kingdom. That's not even a proper formula of repentance. He's just saying, remember me when you come into your kingdom.
And you remember what Jesus says? He says, today you will be with me in paradise. That man is numbered among the saints.
[14:26] Right now, that man who is hanging on the cross is numbered among the saints. He's wearing a white robe. He's worshiping the lamb in that great multitude. Imagine asking him how he got there.

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Imagine you were able to come up to him in that multitude and say, how did you get here? Because you have to imagine there were some people who knew him in their earthly life and they're like, wait, you're here? They're letting anybody in these days.
You know, Alistair Begg makes this in a well-known sermon. He makes this point. How did you get here? Well, surely, well, I mean, did you come to faith? What does that mean? Well, did you come to believe that salvation happens by grace through faith?
What? Never heard of that before. Well, have you been reading your Bible? I don't even know what a Bible is. Well, surely you were baptized. What's that? Well, why are you here?
He says, I don't know. I'm just as confused as you are. All I know is the man on the cross told me I could come. That's it.
[15:34] No moral reform. The man on the cross told me I could come. And friends, this is the scandal of grace. And if that ever is lost on us, then we need to step away from it and re-approach it and just allow it to strike us again for what it is.

It's a scandal. It's not fair. It's not fair. It's grace. What it means is that when we come into that great multitude, I think we're going to encounter some very surprising people.
People we never, ever, ever thought would be there. You're here? People are probably going to say that to us. They're like, they're letting pastors in? They're letting anybody in.
So the multitude shows us the extraordinary scope of God's salvation. People from every tribe, tongue, and nation. The white robes show us how they have been made worthy to stand before the throne.
And it's not through their own righteousness. It is through the blood of the Lamb. And then finally, the Lamb shows us the ultimate purpose and destination of salvation.
[16:43] And here's the spoiler alert. It is not heaven. It's not heaven. Look at this promise. 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. All suffering everywhere is going to end.
That's what this is saying. How? 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. The Lamb becomes the shepherd. The one who sacrificed Himself for His sheep.
Is now the one who leads them into everlasting life. And you say, well, I thought they were where they were going to be. Aren't they in this heavenly realm where they're around the throne of God and they're worshiping?
[17:43] Isn't that where we go when we die? And then people wonder, well, man, is it going to be weird to just sing for hours and hours into eternity? And are we going to get bored? And all of the questions that especially kids ask and adults are too afraid to ask, but we also ask.

And, you know, what's that going to be like? Well, the last line is a clue. Where are they going? The last line is a clue. When it says that God will wipe away every tear, that's a very specific reference to the very end of the book of Revelation, chapter 21.
And there we see that God's promise is not simply to help people escape this world by, like, whisking us off to heaven while the world burns. Which is a lot of what's been taught in recent Christian history and especially in the evangelical church.
God's ultimate purpose is to renew and restore this creation. So the ultimate Christian hope is not that God takes us out of the world and into heaven.
The ultimate Christian hope is that heaven comes to earth. Is that the heavens and the earth are joined. The new Jerusalem comes down. That the physical world is made new.
[18:56] It's that God makes all things new. The resurrection of our bodies and the restoration of the world. And look what happens on that day.

God himself will wipe every tear from their eyes. He could have just said, there'll be no more tears. But he's saying more than that.
God himself will wipe away every tear. What does that mean? Think about your tears. Think about your pain. Every grief.
Every disappointment. Every loss. Every tear shed in a hospital room. At a graveside. Every sorrow that no one else knew about.

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Not one of those tears has escaped the notice of God. One day this is saying, like a father comforts his child.
[20:04] God himself will wipe each tear away. God himself will wipe each tear away. So when we look at old photographs.

And we remember the people that we've lost. Of course it's sad. And of course we miss them. But we don't have to wonder where they are.
John reminds us. John reminds us. That death does not have the final word. That those who have died in Christ are a part of that great multitude.
And through Jesus Christ. We can share in that same hope. The hope of one day joining in that great multitude. Being clothed in white.
Worshipping the Lamb. Until Jesus Christ makes all things new. And this world becomes our home. Let's pray.
[21:14] Lord we thank you and praise you for this hope. And we know that it doesn't come into hearts. By human means. We know that your Holy Spirit has to open us.

And awaken us. To this being more than just a nice idea. Lord and I pray that you would awaken. And open. And soften hardened hearts to this.
I pray that you would stir up sleepy hearts. Lord that all of us would be. Would be. Knocked off our feet. By what this means.
And I pray that even as we move forward with this service. Into our baptism and our time of prayer. And as we gather around your table. You would press these things into our hearts. Lord that we would have hope in you.
And that we would glorify you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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