

A Great Multitude: A Glimpse of Our Future

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[0:00] Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Well, this Sunday is one of those Sundays where we are wading into contested waters.

If you want to get Christians arguing with one another, there are a few topics that will almost never fail. One great example is the topic of predestination, which I am going to be taking up in a few weeks with fear and trembling, I might add, in our adult Sunday school class.

Another example touches on our topic for today, and that is eschatology, the branch of theology dealing with the last things, which, of course, includes everything we think of when we think of the end times.

I'm preaching this morning, then, on our reading from Revelation, which carries the potential of taking us down a huge rabbit trail. You know, what is this great tribulation that could then lead us into a discussion on a pre-tribulation or post-tribulation rapture, and we could end up talking also about all kinds of other things.

[1:42] I will simply say, Anglicans tend not to wade too deeply into these controversies, because it can lead to unhealthy conflict or division between Christians, and potentially can lead to some rather strange ideas.

I think we've probably all seen examples of things like that at work. Now, if you're ever interested in my views on these questions, I would be happy to share them with you, but that is not the point of this morning's sermon.

I will simply say that my take is that this one sentence says it well enough for me, and that is, He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom will have no end.

So what is the focus of this morning's sermon if it isn't to draw up a chart of the end times?

I actually do want to talk about the tribulation mentioned here and the great multitude represented in this passage. What can we tell about them? How does that apply to us?

[2:44] Now, if we were to say that the multitude mentioned here only consists of those who have lived through or died in the final time of persecution before the coming of Christ, and some people would say that, we're left with the question of why this number is so incredibly large and so diverse.

The plain reading of the text would seem to indicate that we're talking about a multitude of people for more than one moment in time. That's especially true when we consider the context of Revelation.

As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, Revelation was written to a persecuted and a suffering church. They would have been likely, the original hearers, in hearing this description, not to be thinking only of the distant future, but also of their present circumstances.

The hope that they themselves had in the face of persecution and suffering and death. Now, regardless of whether or not we think that the most intense period of Christian persecution in history will take place immediately before the Lord's return, and I tend to think that it will, the great tribulation as it is described here is pertinent to more than one particular moment in time.

As Paul says in 2 Timothy 3, Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. And as Jesus said, in this world you will have trouble.

[4:22] So here's what I would say. I think it likely that the first hearers of Revelation would have seen themselves in that great multitude described in Revelation 7.

I think that you and I, if we are believers, should see ourselves as well in that great multitude. So when you look at this passage, I would say that you are seeing a vivid description of your own future.

You might be saying, wait a minute. How did I pass through the great tribulation? Haven't been taken to the flames from my faith in Christ? And that's true.

And that's true. But you have had trouble, and you will have trouble. You will endure some measure of persecution if you are a Christian. There will be people who hate you and wish you ill.

Even today, there are people in the world who would do you harm if they had the opportunity, just because you are a Christian. If you're shocked at that, consider this.

[5:21] We've heard of recent attacks against Christians who are doing nothing other than what we are doing right now. The enemies of Christ who would do such a thing to other believers would like to do the same thing to you if they could.

And that, of course, is just one example of the world-hating followers of Jesus. Now, I'm not saying this to scare you. I am saying this so that you are prepared if that day ever comes, because we have to be prepared for that possibility.

Because there is a sense in which the entire church age, from the time of the New Testament until the Lord returns, has been and will be a time of tribulation.

The devil is still fighting his losing battle. The sinful world is still fighting its losing rebellion against the rightful King, Jesus.

That means that we will suffer. That means that we will die. That means that people will hate us without a cause. And you're sitting there thinking, Why is this jerk talking about this stuff during Eastertide, right?

[6:30] We're supposed to be joyful. But I am preaching today full of joy because the good news is greater than all of this bad news.

Because the light does shine in the darkness and the darkness really does not overcome it. I am not preaching gloom and doom. I am preaching about a certain hope that cannot be defeated no matter what.

So this morning, I want us to look at this great multitude, which will include you and me. Talk about who they are, what their eternity will look like.

And again, that means what your eternity looks like if you were a Christian. So to begin, I want to mention some notable points about this great multitude.

Please look with me, if you will, in Revelation 7. And there we read, Now the first point I want to raise about this great multitude is that they are a great multitude, gathered around the throne of God.

[7:54] What does that tell us? It tells us a few things. It tells us that the mission of the gospel will be successful, right? More people than we can even count from every people group imaginable will find salvation in Jesus Christ.

So when Christian witness and ministry seems hard or even impossible, we need to keep that in mind. God's rescue mission in his son, Jesus, will be successful even in the face of fierce opposition.

The gospel will reach places that is never reached. People will hear of Jesus and believe in him in places where his name has never been spoken before.

We already catch a glimpse of that great multitude in our congregation. Of course, we can be numbered.

I'll be writing the number in the register in a little bit. But we are part of a much bigger fellowship that spans across the centuries and across the world.

[8:58] In case you're wondering if that is so, think about this. Not everyone in this church grew up in the same country.

Not all of us grew up speaking the same first language. And yet here we are. Gathered together on a Sunday morning as one family.

As we will be for eternity. Next thing I want us to consider about that great multitude is that they are wearing white robes.

What is a symbol of purity, right? The symbolism there is pretty obvious. So you have to ask, does this mean that this multitude consists only of super special holy people who never struggled or messed up?

Well, there are a couple of reasons that isn't the case. First, only Jesus fits the qualification for someone who never sinned, who was truly and perfectly pure, right?

[10:05] There are not a great multitude of people who fit that description. And we see an answer further on in our passage when we see them described in this way.

These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. So they have washed their robes and their robes are white because of the blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ.

That is the only way to have a white robe, to have purity and holiness, and to be part of this great multitude. Being washed in the blood of the Lamb. Because the best of us, all we have on our own is filthy rags, right?

We fall so short of God's perfection. But if we trust in Christ and His blood shed for us, He takes away our sin and guilt, washes it away, and gives us His perfect righteousness instead.

So that we can stand before the throne of God. And that's the only way we who have sinned can spend eternity in God's presence. That's why those in the great multitude are wearing white robes.

[11:18] Now before we move on to the description of what the future holds for this great multitude, I want to mention one final observation about the description. They are holding palm branches.

Scholars have debated what the palm branches represent. I won't get into all of the details. I'm sure you'll thank me for that.

But here is the interpretation I find most convincing. In the ancient world, palm branches were a sign of victory. The point then would be this. These people share in the victory of Jesus.

Now that might seem kind of odd. When we think about the fact that this multitude consists of those who have endured suffering and trouble. Wait, they're carrying a sign of victory?

But I think that this is the point. No matter how bad the trouble is. No matter how great the tribulation. The victory that is found in Christ is unimaginably greater.

[12:21] I want us to turn our attention now to the final three verses in our revelation passage for this morning.

To consider the description of the future of this great multitude. We'll take it verse by verse remembering of course that if we are believers in Jesus, all of these things apply to us too.

So, we read, Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple. And he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

Now, that is such great news. Isn't it? Saint Augustine of Hippo once said that God made us for himself and that our hearts are restless until they rest in God.

In other words, we were created to know God, to love God, to be loved by him, and to glorify him. That's the joy that we were created for. To be with God, to serve him, to find our joy in him.

[13:26] Our hearts will never be satisfied with anything less. And the point here is that if we are part of that multitude who know Jesus, who have been washed in his blood, we will have the desire of our hearts.

And we will have it forever. It will make all of the difficulties we have ever faced more than worth it when we are in his presence.

Let's look at the next verse. On a personal note, as someone who sunburns and overheats easily, the last portion of this verse is particularly appealing.

But seriously, the point is that this great multitude will never be in need, never be in danger, never suffer again. They will have the total protection of God, the total provision of God, living in his presence.

Because for the Christian, the hardships of this life are truly temporary. But God's provision for us is never ending.

[14:44] And now let's look at the final verse of our passage appointed for this morning where we read, For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd. He will guide them to springs of living water.

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Jesus will be with us forever. Jesus will shepherd us, watch over us, care for us.

We will be with the one whose voice we know, who gave his life for us, and who calls us each by name for eternity. Remember what Jesus said in John 10, which we read just a few minutes ago.

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they will never perish. And no one will snatch them out of my hand.

Jesus guides us to living water and gives us eternal life.

[15:48] And then we get that final wonderful promise that for those in this multitude, God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. I suspect that we have some eyes in this congregation this morning that have shed many tears of sorrow.

No matter how heartbroken you are or have been, I want you to know today that the Bible is clear that for everyone who is in Christ, there is coming a day when the tears will be gone forever. The great multitude described in Revelation 7 is full of people who suffered the hardships of this life. Some having suffered terribly, some having suffered terribly, some having been horribly persecuted, and even still, the victory won by the blood of Christ has the final word over their eternity.

So do you see yourself in this great multitude? If so, rejoice.

[17:06] You have been given a glimpse this morning of what forever will look like for you. If you don't see yourself in this multitude, if you don't know Jesus, please put your trust in him today.

Ask him to wash you in his blood. This passage, written for Christians facing difficult circumstances, is such a reminder of God's goodness to us that never fails.

And of what a joy and what a treasure it is to know Jesus Christ. The only fitting response really is to praise him.

So I close with this. Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever.

Amen.