

14-08-05 AM - Heaven in Me Before I am in Heaven - Revelation 7:9-12

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[0 : 00] let's pray as we stand father we thank you for the opportunity to sing those words which remind us of that great day which Paul wrote about when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord help us to have that vision in our hearts and minds now and to live our lives in the light of that truth in Jesus name Amen well perhaps you would open your Bibles again to the passage in Revelation 7 which was read to us just a moment ago and as you'll see from today's notice sheet and from the screen we're looking at the theme of heaven in me before I am in heaven and we'll concentrate on this wonderful song from the book of Revelation Revelation 7, 9 to 12 let me begin with a few words which were spoken by a philosopher of some while ago he wrote these words shortly before his death his name was Bertrand Russell there is darkness without and when I die there will be darkness within there is no splendor no vastness anywhere only triviality for a moment and then nothing and in those sentences as I say written shortly before he died he summed up how many people in the western world view their life and their death that is in the west we find it hard to avoid the conclusion that this material world is all there is some people have a suspicion of an afterlife but for many people that is an irrelevance their prevailing philosophy is eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die or tomorrow we die

I think we should say these days that is how people view life that is we maximize on our present experience we expend our energies and our money to make sure that we enjoy this present moment and we avoid thinking about ultimate issues and I'm afraid to say I think very often we Christians have not always done a very good job in encouraging people to think about the reality of heaven the afterlife we've not always portrayed an image of the afterlife which attracts people I remember as a younger Christian reading the book *Miracle on the River Kwai* by a man called Ernest Gordon and in that book he said that before he became a Christian he regarded Christians as people who had extracted the bubbles from the champagne of life he said I would prefer a robust hell to the grey sunless abode of the faithful in other words when they thought about heaven it only seemed to be in those rather drab and boring terms and I suppose many Christians think about heaven in the same way as they think about death die well that's the last thing I'll do heaven that's the last thing I'll think about I remember hearing a story as a child of a minister of a church who was called to visit an elderly couple and the husband was seriously ill perhaps close to death and as the minister went to visit the wife said to him before he went entered the bedroom to speak to her husband she said do speak to him about something cheerful and hopeful not about heaven and all that and it's true isn't it that we've become rather earthbound we've become rather secularised now in reality the real world is the world of heaven that's the home where we belong it's this world which the New Testament reminds us is passing away and therefore I've introduced by way of the title for this morning some words which was spoken of a man called Richard Sibbs he was a great Puritan preacher great Puritan writer and this is what was said of this man of this good man let this be written heaven was in him before he was in heaven heaven was in him before he was in heaven and my suggestion is that if that was true of us if heaven is in us before we are in heaven then we will know what on earth we should be doing that the vision of heaven which we are given in a song such as this in Revelation 7 will motivate us to be engaged wholeheartedly in God's purposes while we are here on earth now the book of Revelation of course as you know literally lifts the curtain it's an unveiling and we catch a glimpse of what heaven will be like and we find several passages here in Revelation which we call the songs of heaven they are wonderfully colourful sections of the Bible read with our imaginations because here the multitude appears the atmosphere is charged with excitement the worship is demonstrative and noisy these

are people who've come through great difficulty and are now there in the presence of Jesus himself so let's look at the characteristics of heaven just given us in these verses and I want to highlight three characteristics and as we look at them ask the question is heaven in me before I am in heaven

I hope they'll appear on the screen the first is this the vision is of God's family the vision is of God's family if you look at verse 9 it's the well known phrase that we often repeat that vision that John has there before me was a great multitude that no one could count from every nation tribe people and language so John's vision of God's family in heaven includes representatives from every part of the globe and he deliberately piles up those expressions nation tribe people and language to show that the redeemed are not from some restricted group but they come from all over the world think on the overhead there's also reference Revelation 14 6 where John sees an angel with the gospel to proclaim to every nation tribe language and people it's a universal family that John sees there and God aims to be worshipped by converts from every corner of the globe John states that this international community is innumerable verse 9 a great multitude that no one could count and there of course he's reflecting some of the ideas which were promised back in the Old Testament do you remember how God spoke to Abraham again the verses from Genesis are on the screen there the promise in Genesis 15 verse 5 where God took Abraham outside of his tent on one night and said look up into the sky and just try and count all of the stars if you can and so your offspring will be or if you're walking along the beach just try and count the number of grains of the sand so will your offspring be

God promised Abraham and therefore this is John's vision all of Abraham's true offspring all of the servants of God from throughout the generations and from all around the globe they're now in heaven extending as far as his eye could see as he puts it in that vision this great multitude streaming in every direction but also there standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb that is heaven and if heaven is going to be populated by people from every nation and language and tribe and people then of course God's purposes now his missionary purposes are global are worldwide and if heaven is in us before we are in heaven then we will be passionately committed to see John's vision become a reality we will want to see that international goal of God's mission fulfilled I think though it doesn't need to be said that this is increasingly difficult for us in the western world there are a number of reasons why holding this vision of God's family

[7 : 53] God's international family is increasingly difficult I just suggest two challenges and they'll appear on the screen first of all there's the mood of our age the tolerant spirits of living in plural societies as we do where anybody who stands up for absolute truth who stands up for the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is branded a divisive fanatic you can't be so dogmatic people will say to assert that the Christian faith is for the whole world they're happy for it to be for us in Australia or me in Britain for Caucasians but don't try to absolutize it don't try to universalize the Christian faith and therefore to proclaim Jesus and the cross of Jesus as the only way in this world of pluralism will be to invite opposition and perhaps even more derision in the future I suspect that's the way it's going to be for us and in this atmosphere it's not easy for us Christians to hold on to this vision that John gives us of God's international family the conviction that Jesus is the only way to find our place in heaven and there's a second trend in society which I think is affecting us a second challenge which could extinguish this vision which we have in Revelation 7 it's the paradox that as the global communications networks improve at the same time there's a shrinking of our horizons our world is getting smaller in many ways we can understand more about our world but somehow people's interests are being reduced there was a sit-in at the University of Oxford

I live in Oxford and I was so surprised that there was a student sit-in I don't know if you remember those they were when I was a student actually when students were revolting in the 1960s and 70s and I was so surprised that there was a sit-in at Oxford University I was encouraged it's not that I'm particularly radical but it was nice to see people challenging the indifference that sometimes occurs but why were they sitting in at the University of Oxford was it third world debt or global inequality or the war in Iraq actually the reason they were protesting was to do with the university creche facilities they were protesting about childcare in the university and I'm afraid to say that's not just young people it's true for older people like myself our world shrinks we become more interested in our own nation our own region our own denomination our own local church our own family maybe my own Christian life that becomes increasingly the focus for so many people now that trend again is not a legitimate one if we are holding heaven in our hearts now those concerns

I've mentioned about our church our nation our home our personal life they're all proper concerns but the tribalism of our world or the individualism of the western world in which we live should not be allowed to extinguish John's vision of God's international family and of course it's happening all around the world the way in which God's church is growing I made those points early on in the service about the wonderful way in which the gospel is advancing in many parts of the world and we in the western world have much to learn from what God is doing in other parts of the world it's a wonderful story of the way in which John's vision is becoming a reality I mentioned in the eight o'clock service that there are this morning more Christians in Anglican churches in Nigeria than in Australia the United Kingdom the whole of Europe and the United States combined there are 24,000 African people coming to faith in Christ every week as far as we can assess something like 1600 new churches being planted the assemblies of God in Latin America now have 10 times as many members as they do in North America there are more Christians worshipping in churches in China today than in the whole of Western Europe there is an extraordinary growth as God's work extends all around the world John's vision is becoming a reality and therefore my brothers and sisters I'm sure it's true for you here in Doncaster that this vision of God's international family should be in our hearts on our lips shaping our prayers shaping the way we read our newspapers touching our pockets influencing our work as part of the local church here in Melbourne the vision is of God's family second thing about heaven in these verses the reason is God's gospel the reason is God's gospel it's an enormous privilege isn't it for us to be in Christian communities which are quite international and you are here I can tell it's a wonderful joy for me to be working in different cultures and to enjoy the privilege of seeing Christians with great diversity in all kinds of contexts

I enjoy the West Indian music and the Latin American embrace and the different views of time in some Latin and African cultures all kinds of diversity and we as Christians are enriched by this cultural diversity which we find within the family of God but the intriguing question is if in a world which is increasingly fractured along ethnic and national lines how is it possible for God's people to be united and the answer here is here in heaven of course verse 10 they cried out in a loud voice salvation belongs to our God that God's gospel expressed in the saving work of Jesus Christ transcends all of those barriers those cultural and linguistic and racial and national boundaries and therefore we find God's family united through Christ's work and verses 9 and 10 give a wonderful insight into that worship in heaven just mention three things in verses 9 and 10 number one what they wear you'll notice it says they were wearing white robes and of course at its simplest that's symbolic of their right relationship with God they are standing there having been cleansed by Jesus verse 14 actually if you just look at that we didn't read that section they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb so there standing in heaven are men and women who have been made right who are clothed in Christ's righteousness they stand in their white robes saying we are here because of Jesus shed blood so what they wear points to God's gospel secondly what they hold you'll notice in verse 9 they were holding palm branches in their hands now palm branches are a symbol of rejoicing and victory palm branches are often associated with the feast of tabernacles in the Old Testament that joyful party that week long holiday as at the end of harvest they celebrated the successful ingathering of the harvest but they also gave thanks to God for delivering them and for bringing them into the promised land do you remember that wonderful prophecy that Isaiah gave where the feast pointed to that final harvest

[15 : 23] Isaiah predicted when God would gather his own from all nations swallow up death for all time and wipe tears away from all faces again words which are picked up in John's vision in the book of Revelation so John sees that celebration in heaven with people from all nations waving their palm branches redeemed by the one Lord Jesus Christ as a picture of that final harvest that final ingathering that final liberation in heaven is a celebration of Jesus triumph of Jesus victory and then the third thing to notice is what they shout it's in verse 10 they cried out with a loud voice salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb in fact some commentaries call it this the salvation shout for that is what it is in chapter 5 of course just a couple of chapters earlier John sees the lion of the tribe of Judah who comes in triumph and he uses this language who is also the Lamb who is slain it's an extraordinary juxtaposition the lion of the tribe of Judah is the Lamb who was slain the conqueror is the one who submits to God's purposes on the cross and that's what

John sees that's what they shout in this song salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb they're the ever increasing concentric circles of God's people from all around the world worshipping the Lamb who was slain so they are there in heaven because of God's gospel the reason is God's gospel now again I want to just draw two points of application about that theme first of all the importance of unity you notice there in that heavenly choir in verse 10 verse 9 it says they come from different nations they're speaking different languages but intriguingly this choir has no confusion of tongues do you notice that Babel is a thing of the past and there is instead a shout of unanimity that comes with this single voice in that salvation shout of verse 10 they're diverse of course God hasn't obliterated the distinctions and the diversity all of which as I've implied I think is an enrichment to us as the Christian community but what God has done has gathered them into one diverse but unified assembly that is heaven so I ask again is heaven in our hearts before we are in heaven because as far as Jesus was concerned this element is fundamental to our Christian witness do you remember how he prayed thinking about the effectiveness of our universal mission our worldwide mission John 17 verse 23 he prayed for this kind of unity so that the world might believe in other words the way we live as a Christian community gives credibility to the gospel which reconciles us with God and which reconciles us with one another I don't know if you've ever tried to nod your head and say no and shake your head and say yes at the same time it was quite difficult I once had to visit the country of Bulgaria and I didn't realise that they used these cultural signals differently from England and that shaking their head like that was yes and nodding like that was no and as I was preaching

I began to see people shake their heads like this so I thought I better preach a bit more vigorously and the heads shook even more vigorously now if I guess if I did that in Australia or certainly in my own culture if I did that and said yes I would be giving two conflicting signals and so often that is precisely what we do as a Christian community we say on the one hand we are all one in Christ Jesus and yet so often by the manner in which we act and work and live we are giving a very different message and the divisions and the fracture lines and the wranglings within the Christian community give a different message from what heaven is all about and therefore I wonder if we are celebrating with that one voice whether as God's people united together because of God's gospel in Jesus Christ we are sharing the truth that God reconciles us to himself and to one another I do believe if we do that more effectively in this broken world we will be demonstrating the reality of heaven and giving credibility to the gospel message and the second challenge the second point of application is sometimes what is referred to as the scandal of particularity but what do I mean by that well

I've already hinted that people today don't mind us being Christians what they object to is a suggestion of the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ the uniqueness of Jesus as the one way to heaven well in heaven as we've seen people are united there through Christ's work there at the centre of this countless multitude is the lamb who was slain and I wonder if it's possible that the reason why so many of us are not always caught up in God's purposes worldwide and God's mission worldwide is that we harbour this secret suspicion that Jesus Christ is not the only way I was in Norway just a few weeks ago and after a missions convention it was a two day event a woman came up to me at the door and said you know I think I am a closet universalist to explain what she meant by that she had very good English she meant that secretly she longed to believe that everybody would end up in heaven that was her secret hope that everybody would make it in the end and don't we all wish that that were true the reality of course from the New Testament's teaching is that we find our way into heaven through Jesus Christ this is what this song is all about what they wear what they hold what they cry out all say

[21 : 47] Jesus is the only way it's a wonderfully Christocentric vision of heaven Christ right at the centre of heaven that is the answer to this fractured world isn't it to point men and women to Jesus Christ that's the answer to the fracture lines within our own hearts than the weaknesses which we feel the brokenness it is Jesus who died and rose again who has ascended and who will return as we've declared in the Apostles Creed this morning and as we will celebrate in just a moment as we break bread together so heaven the vision is of God's family the reason is God's gospel thirdly the focus is God's glory just read again those wonderful verses in 11 and 12 all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures they fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God saying Amen praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God forever and ever

Amen and the way in which that should be read really is with the article each item preceded by the article the blessing not just a blessing it is the praise the glory above all other glories belong to our God forever and ever so the focus of heaven when that harvest is finally gathered in will be the glory of God it won't be a particular nation or a particular denomination or particular organisations it's all to do ultimately with the glory of God and that's why if heaven is in us before we are in heaven we are called to anticipate that celebration of God's glory now if heaven is about celebrating God's glory that is how we should live our lives now do you remember the beautiful psalm psalm 96 that deliberately calls us to declare his glory among the nations that we declare his glory in our worship we declare his glory in our mission in our evangelism in our everyday work and we do so among the nations we are not some hermetically sealed community here that has nothing to do with the world out there we declare his glory among the nations and our task is to call our friends and to call our neighbours to call our work colleagues to call our fellow students to call all men and women to worship him

John Piper uses a lovely expression when he says mission exists because worship doesn't Jesus was an evangelist for worshippers and the reason I think for our lack of concern my limited commitment to missions sometimes my half-hearted praying is of my little felt emotion my burning desire for the glory of God I remember as a younger man being very moved by the story of Henry Martin who was a 19th century scholar from Cambridge who went out as a young man to serve the Lord in India he died as quite a young man I think when he was under 40 and he described in some of his writings how he watched people prostrating themselves before pagan images and he even heard someone describe a vision of Jesus bowing down to Mohammed and this is what he wrote I was cut to the soul at this blasphemy I could not endure existence if Jesus was not glorified it would be hell to me if he were thus dishonoured and there is a man with a passion for God's glory so I ask again is heaven in our hearts before we are in heaven do we know what on earth we should be doing in the light of this wonderful vision of heaven if this is a definition of heaven

God's family saved by God's gospel celebrating God's glory then is heaven in us before that great day when we ourselves will be with all of God's people around the throne let me finish by quoting from a man called David Bryant who uses the expression world Christian or global Christian and the definition is on the screen I wonder if this is true for us and for our service in the church a world Christian is someone who is so gripped by the glory of God and the glory of his global purpose that he chooses to align himself with God's mission to fill the earth with the knowledge of his glory as the waters cover the sea the burning prayer of the world Christian is let the peoples praise thee oh God let all the peoples praise thee Amen work Messiah who is also thank you for calling impulse the fires of the poder and doesn't let all the béfo who can you ■■■■■■ amen i can you just guaranty and about are and