

The Church Triumphant

Revelation 7:9-12

3/29/2015

Victory is a beautiful word. At the end of World War II, when victory over Germany was actually declared, people all over the world danced in the streets. The same thing happened when Japan surrendered. The entire world breathed a collective sigh of relief. However, that sense of victory is as nothing compared with the victory that John shows us here in the ultimate and final Palm Sunday.

Last time in Revelation, we looked at the 144,000. We came to the conclusion that the 144,000 is a description of the church militant. The church militant means the church here on earth, fighting against the forces of evil (with spiritual weapons, of course, not real ones). The 144,000 need that seal of the Holy Spirit in order to protect them from the seals of judgment. Now John turns his attention to those who do not need the seal of protection, since they are out of reach of all danger. They are in heaven, standing around the throne-room of God. Remember the question raised at the end of chapter 6? The question is, "Who can stand?" Indeed, who can stand in the day of God's wrath? The righteous angels can stand. The 144,000 will stand. The innumerable multitude that John sees here is currently standing before God's throne. They have nothing to fear from God's judgment, for God has given them the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The first thing to notice about this innumerable multitude is just that: it is innumerable. There are many Christians who think that the number of those saved from condemnation is small. They will go to texts where Jesus says that the gate is narrow, and there be few who walk through it. However, over time, that few grows into a multitude. And we must not forget that this number includes many who died in infancy, or in the womb.

Incidentally, since many people wonder about it, we should say what Scripture says about the death of infants and also miscarriages. Scripture says that parents who are believers have nothing to fear concerning the destination of those children of theirs that God takes at such a young age. Concerning the children of unbelievers, Scripture is silent, except that we know four things: God is merciful, and God is just, and therefore there will be no mistakes on Judgment Day; and that if God does save infant children of unbelievers, He does it by regenerating them before their deaths. Children are not innocent, even in the womb. They need regeneration. So, we don't know the destination for sure of the children of unbelievers who die young, but we know that God will make no mistakes, and we can leave that in God's hands. At any rate, we can be fairly confident that the great multitude that John sees includes many, many people who died early.

The second thing to notice is the unity in diversity. I know that those are buzz words today. Still, they do convey something important about this great multitude. We know that they are unified, because they all wear the white robes, as

verse 9 says, and they all carry the palm branches. They all cry out the same thing about salvation in verse 10. Yes, they are unified. What is important to say about this unity is that it is unity in Christ, and by no other principle. They are not united simply by being human. They are not united because “everyone is going to the same place.” They are not unified because “we all worship the same God.” We don't all worship the same God. Not everyone worships a Trinitarian God. Usually, when people say “don't we all worship the same God,” they are secretly broadening the definition of God to include anything that kinda sorta sounds like our God. Furthermore, even outward worship of the same God does not mean that everyone who does that is going to the same place. We are not saved by our worship. We are saved by Jesus Christ. The innumerable multitude are unified because they all belong body and soul to their Lord Jesus Christ, and are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, by Christ alone, to the glory of God alone, told to us in Scripture alone. The innumerable multitude is unified around Jesus Christ as He is presented to us in the true gospel. That, and that alone, unified God's true people. The fact that even that limitation will still result in an innumerable multitude should make us wonder at the grace of God. Not one of that innumerable multitude deserves to stand there dressed in white. God would have been perfectly just to make it a small number of people. God, however, in His wisdom, has made the number innumerable. Truly, God has kept His promise to Abraham, that his descendants would be more in number than the stars in the sky, more numerous than the sand on the seashore. The innumerable multitude represents the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. That is a very important strand of biblical teaching tied up with a nice ribbon on top!

The innumerable multitude is not only unified, but it is also diverse. John says that they come from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue. This phrase will occur several times throughout Revelation. Imagine its importance to the first readers of Revelation! They had probably thought that they were going to be the last Christians, with persecution being so fierce. Many of them had died already, and many more would be martyred before the edict of toleration came under the reign of Constantine. But that was hundreds of years away from John's readers in the late first century. For all they knew, this was it. They were islands in a sea of uncertainty. John gives them hope that the gospel would actually prevail and expand beyond their boundaries to encompass every nation in the world. Bible translation is a good indicator of where we are in this endeavor. As of November 2014, the Bible has been translated in its entirety into 531 languages, with an additional 1,329 languages having the New Testament. There are still 1,860 languages that need a Bible translation. It makes one wonder whether we really need all 104 complete English translations that are out there. Wouldn't it be better for Bible translators to focus on those who don't have a Bible at all, rather than creating yet another niche Bible for a sub-group of a sub-group of Christianity?

We need to be promoting this vision of a unified and diverse people of God from every people group on earth. That is what John sees, and that is what the Holy Spirit of God will create, using even us as His instruments.

John mentions the white robes of the innumerable multitude, but since that is explained fully in the next passage, we will hold off on a detailed explanation. We will just notice that the robes are white, and the reason they are white, is that they are washed in the blood of the Lamb, as verse 14 makes very clear.

The people are holding palm branches in their hands. In the Gospel accounts, the people also held palm branches for what we call the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. We explored, in past Palm Sundays, the history of Judas Maccabeus cleansing the temple, and how the people of his day held palm branches to signify Judas Maccabeus' victory over Antiochus Epiphanes. The people of Jesus' day thought that they were doing the same thing, only Jesus would free them from Roman oppression. Same story, different players. However, Jesus did not come to free the Jews from Roman oppression. He came to free people from their sins. The palm branches have the same symbolic value that the sign for "V" had at the time of WWII. It meant victory. The people of God standing around the throne can do so because of the victory that Jesus has won for them.

Victory comes through salvation. It is only the people in white robes who can hold the palm branches around the throne-room of God. The ultimate victory does not come in this life, then. It comes in the next. Living the life of victory happens when we are standing around the throne-room of God. This would also be encouraging to the first readers of this text, since they would then know that their present suffering was not going to determine their destiny. The vision that John has for them is what they will experience.

This innumerable multitude knows exactly why and how it got there. They got there because salvation belongs to God. He is the one who initiates salvation. They say that salvation belongs to God, because God owns salvation, as it were. God the Father came up with the idea, and He brought it about through His Son, and applied it to us and to all God's people by the power of the Holy Spirit. Truly, salvation belongs to the Triune God. That is how the people of God arrived at that wonderful place around the throne-room of God.

The reason they are there is to sing the praises of our God. And it is not just the multitude that worships God at this point. The angels fall down, the elders fall down, the four living creatures, and the multitude all cry out the seven-fold blessing to the Lord God. Notice that this seven-fold blessing begins and ends with the word "Amen." We have looked at this word before. It is a confession of faith wrapped up in one little word. It means that the people saying it believe it. Of course, they see God directly, and so faith as we know it has changed into sight. However, they will still ever and always believe God's word.

So, how do we apply this text to our lives? First of all, we must believe that

salvation is the way to victory. It is only by being washed in the blood of the Lamb that we will one day hold those ultimate palm branches. Have you been washed in the blood of the Lamb? Has God done for you what He did for Joshua the high priest in the book of Zechariah, chapter 3? Hear now what the white robe means:

Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to oppose him. And the Lord said to Satan, "The Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?" Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and was standing before the Angel. Then He answered and spoke to those who stood before Him, saying, "Take away the filthy garments from him." And to him He said, "See, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I will clothe you with rich robes." And I said, "Let them put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head, and they put the clothes on him. And the Angel of the Lord stood by.

Secondly, are we doing everything we can to promote that kingdom of people from every tribe, nation, people, and language? We are placed in a particular area and time. Our immediate concern is with our community, *all* those in our community, *no one* excluded. Are we praying for them? Are we praying for the lost? Are we praying for opportunities to share the gospel with those who need it? Do we even have a heart for the lost?

Thirdly, do we have too narrow a view of the kingdom of God? You know the old joke: the true church consists of only you and me, and I'm starting to have doubts about you. The true church consists of all those who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, no matter what denomination they call home. Yes, some churches do not teach the truth. Some churches are so apostate that those who are true believers in their midst are saved in spite of their church's teaching, not because of it. Those folks need our prayers, for they are in a difficult situation. We need to pray for the universal church, not just our own church, or our own denomination.

Fourthly, do we have too broad a view of the kingdom of God? Yes, there is an innumerable multitude around the throne-room of God. That doesn't mean that everyone's belief is right for them, as long as they believe it sincerely. That is really what post-modernism is: salvation by sincerity. Jesus says quite clearly, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Me." It is available to all who hear. It belongs only to those who truly believe. We must not have too narrow or too broad a view of the kingdom of God. The reason for that is that our view of the scope of the kingdom of God affects how we see other people, and how we treat them. It also affects how we see our church here at Lebanon, and our denomination. We need to know that the PCA is not the only branch of God's true church. And we also need to know that there are some true

believers even in denominations that are apostate. The denomination a person belongs to does not determine what an individual might believe. I have known many, many people who are part of a denomination, and they have no clue what that denomination actually stands for. Sometimes, when they are told, they are quite shocked! They belong to that church because their family belongs to it, or their social group. So, we need to treat such people with a great deal of charity, sympathy, and prayer. For we do want to encourage them to leave their denomination, if that denomination is not teaching the truth. One example of such a denomination is the PCUSA. One can believe almost anything and be ordained in that denomination. It has started allowing their ministers to conduct same-sex “marriages.” It has long since denied the inerrancy of Scripture. Many ministers deny the Trinity. We have people in our church who can give you chapter and verse on that story. But there are still good people, saved people, in that denomination. I've met some of them. I encourage them to seek greener pastures. We don't want to encourage them simply to church-shop, as if churches were a commodity exchanged on the open market. We encourage them to seek a church where the gospel is faithfully preached, the sacraments properly administered, and church discipline carried out. There is a true church. That true church will be the church that holds palm branches in its hand one day: the ultimate Palm Sunday!

I want to close by reading the words of the hymn we are going to sing. It encapsulates everything about the church triumphant that our text says. “For all the saints who from their labors rest, who thee by faith before the world confessed, thy name, O Jesus, be forever blest. Alleluia! Alleluia! Thou wast their rock, their fortress, and their might; thou, Lord, their Captain in the well-fought fight; thou, in the darkness drear, their one true light. Alleluia! Alleluia! O may thy soldiers faithful, true, and bold, fight as the saints who nobly fought of old, and win with them the victor's crown of gold. Alleluia! Alleluia! The golden evening brightens in the west; soon, soon to faithful warriors comes their rest; sweet is the calm of paradise the blest. Alleluia! Alleluia! But lo! There breaks a yet more glorious day; the saints triumphant rise in bright array; the King of Glory passes on His way. Alleluia! Alleluia! From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast, through gates of pearl streams in the countless host, singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Alleluia! Alleluia!”