

I Believe

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.
(Genesis 1:1 ESV)*

*And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.
(Hebrews 11:6 ESV)*

*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God,
that you may know that you have eternal life.
(1 John 5:13 ESV)*

The Communion Of Saints

May 16th, 2021

Revelation 7:1-17

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Revelation 7. Our topic for this morning is “the communion of the saints”.

Now, once again – some evangelicals get nervous when we start using the word “saints”. So to be clear, we’re not talking about the Virgin Mary or Saint Augustine or Saint Stephen or any other saint in that sense, rather we are using the word in its biblical sense. In the Bible all Christians are addressed as saints. The word “saint” just means “holy ones” and all saved people are holy. They are holy in a POSITIONAL sense from the very moment they come to Christ and they will grow in holiness in a PRACTICAL sense by one degree of glory to the next as they walk with Christ.

So we’re talking about saved people this morning – that’s what we mean when we refer to the communion of the saints. Now in saying that, you might be wondering how this morning’s message will be any different than last week’s message. Last week we were talking about the holy catholic church – the people of God! How is the communion of saints to be distinguished from that? R. Albert Mohler is helpful here, he says:

“The holy catholic church *is* a communion of saints. The creed, therefore, derides any notion of individualism or a “go-it-alone” Christianity. The creed calls all Christians to recognize their new identity as eternal members of the eternal family of the eternal God.”¹

That’s it exactly!

So last week was about the IDEA, this week is about the IDENTITY. To help you understand who we are as the communion of saints – we are going to read two parallel visions as recorded in Revelation chapter 7. Now I know that some people hold different views about the correct interpretation of these particular visions so I will also frequently draw upon The Epistle to the Hebrews which makes many of the same points that we’ll be making this morning – but in straight forward prose. That’s one of the reasons that we are so thankful for the diversity of genres in the New Testament – the same things are often said in slightly different ways over the course of the canon of Scripture, but I do think you will appreciate the beauty and the colour of this presentation that we’ll be looking at this morning in the Revelation of John. Hear now the Word of the Lord beginning at verse 1:

¹ After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree. ² Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, ³ saying, “Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.” ⁴ And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel:

⁵ 12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed, 12,000 from the tribe of Reuben, 12,000 from the tribe of Gad,

⁶ 12,000 from the tribe of Asher, 12,000 from the tribe of Naphtali, 12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh,

⁷ 12,000 from the tribe of Simeon, 12,000 from the tribe of Levi, 12,000 from the tribe of Issachar,

⁸ 12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun, 12,000 from the tribe of Joseph, 12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed.

⁹ After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne

¹ R. Albert Mohler, *The Apostles’ Creed: Discovering Authentic Christianity In An Age Of Counterfeits*, (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2019), 162.

and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”¹¹ And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,¹² saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?”¹⁴ I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “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.

¹⁵ “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.

¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.

¹⁷ For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (Revelation 7:1–17 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Now, as I mentioned most biblical commentators understand these two pictures as essentially overlapping. They are describing the same group of people from two slightly different perspectives.

Let’s look first at the picture described in verses 1-8. Many of you will know that the Jehovah’s Witnesses take this in a very literal sense – and in a very unusual sense. They think it means that there will be only 144,000 TRULY SAVED people – and of course those people are to be identified strictly with the members of their cult. Of course, as their membership grew and eventually surpassed the number 144,000 they were forced to modify their views substantially.

But historically, that is not the way Christians have understood this passage. They have understood this as a symbolic way of referring to the whole people of God – Old Testament and New. The number 144,000 is obviously symbolic – it is 12x12x1000. The twelve Old Testament tribes, times the 12 New Testament disciples x 1000. So William Hendriksen for example says here:

“It is very clear, therefore, that the sealed multitude of Revelation 7 symbolizes the entire Church militant of the old and new dispensations.”²

It would seem then that the second vision is describing the same group of people in a slightly different way. This time the emphasis is less on the span of the covenants and more on the breadth of diversity. John sees:

“a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb”
(Revelation 7:9 ESV)

Again – the majority of Christians and the majority of biblical interpreters understand this as referring to the same group of people. G.K. Beale takes that approach in his commentary and he describes the emphasis of the SECOND PICTURE this way. He says:

“The second picture in 7:9-17 understands the same host from the viewpoint of their actual vast number. Although they are a saved remnant, they are also those who have been gathered from all over the earth and have lived throughout the entire period of the church age. Therefore, they are a multitudinous throng.”³

So, drawing from these two overlapping images I want to say 7 things that will help us better understand our identity as the communion of saints. And then we’ll spend some time at the end talking about how we should live in light of who we are.

The Communion Of Saints:

The first thing I think it is important for us to say is this:

1. The communion of saints emerges out of tribulation

Both of the visions in Revelation 7 seem to communicate that. The first vision happens during some sort of PAUSE in season of great trauma or upheaval. Look at verses 2-3:

² William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 111.

³ G.K. Beale, *The Book Of Revelation NIGTC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 424.

Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea,³ saying, “Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.” (Revelation 7:1–3 ESV)

The imagery here appears to have been lifted directly out of Ezekiel 9. In Ezekiel 9 God sends an angel through the city of Jerusalem with a marking kit. His job is to put a mark on all the faithful people remaining in the city so that the next angel – the angel of judgement and destruction – will not accidentally sweep up the righteous alongside the wicked.

We see precisely the same thing going on here. There is an angel MARKING THE PEOPLE OF GOD in advance of coming judgment. In the tribulation leading up to that judgment the whole people of God are identified and sealed.

We see something very similar in the second vision. Look at verse 14. John has asked one of the heavenly elders to identify this group of people that he sees assembling around the throne of God. Who are these people sir?

And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.” (Revelation 7:14 ESV)

Now, what is the Great Tribulation?

Some people say that it is a brief season at the very end of human history. However, the majority of Christians understand the entire period of history AFTER the ascension of Jesus and BEFORE the return of Jesus as the tribulation. After all Jesus did say:

“In the world you will have tribulation.” (John 16:33 ESV)

So it sounds like tribulation is something that EVERY generation of Christians should expect to endure – not just those who live through the last decade or so of human history. G.K. Beale again is helpful here, he says:

“The tribulation has begun in the present and will be intensified in its severity at the end of history”⁴

I think that’s a very helpful way of thinking about it. Don’t think of the tribulation as a DOT on the historical timeline, just prior to the return of Christ, think of it as a line that escalates and increases the closer we come to the return of Jesus. That seems to be the most biblical way of understanding things.

So, according to these visions, by means of various upheavals, birth pangs and episodes of more intense tribulation the people of God will be SHAKEN OUT and CLEARLY IDENTIFIED and supernaturally MARKED AS EXEMPT from the day of final judgment.

So, hear that: Faith reveals itself under trial and tribulation. Or to say it another way: who you are under pressure IS WHO YOU ARE – spiritually speaking.

And that makes sense. We know that from reading the more straight forward parts of the Bible. All over the Bible we are told that faith isn’t faith until it’s tested. The faith of Abraham was revealed in the binding of Isaac, the faith Rahab was revealed in the hiding of the spies – etc. etc. etc. That’s the story of the bible in a nutshell: God ordains various tests and trials to REVEAL and DISPLAY the faith of the saints – and then apparently – there is some sort of unseen pause – and an angel from the realm of heaven puts a little mark on your forehead that identifies you as one of the people of God. That’s what we’re being told here.

The saints of God are revealed and identified in tribulation.

The second thing we can say is that:

2. The communion of saints stretches across the Old and New Covenants

⁴ G.K. Beale, *The Book Of Revelation NIGTC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 435.

As I mentioned already, the number 144,000 is obviously a symbolic number intending to communicate that the communion of saints is made up of all true believers, Old Testament and New. 12x12x1000. The 12 Old Testament tribes, the 12 disciples and all who follow them.

Revelation uses that same imagery again in chapter 21 when describing the Holy Jerusalem – the ETERNAL CITY OF GOD. It says:

It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of **the twelve tribes** of the sons of Israel were inscribed—¹³ on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. ¹⁴ And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were **the twelve names of the twelve apostles** of the Lamb. (Revelation 21:12–14 ESV)

Now again, if you aren't comfortable with all of this apocalyptic imagery, the same point is made in the straightforward prose parts of the New Testament. The Apostle to the Hebrews writes to Jewish Christians about the BIGNESS and BROADNESS of this new assembly. He says in Hebrews 12:22-23:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect (Hebrews 12:22–23 ESV)

This is a big group here, he says, and it is not just made up of Jews, it is made up of all people from everywhere who have put their faith in JESUS the only begotten Son of the living God. The new Jerusalem is ALL the spirits of the righteous made perfect – all the SAINTS of God, praise the Lord!

Ok – so the communion of saints emerges out of the tribulation and stretches across both testaments – and as we've been talking about, it is gathered out of every tribe, tongue and nation on planet earth.

3. The communion of saints is gathered out of every tribe, tongue and nation on earth

We talked about this at some length last week but it deserves to be repeated here, particularly given the recent controversies around race in the wider evangelical church. I love what D.A. Carson says here, commenting on this vision in Revelation 7; he says:

“There is not a whiff of racism here ... The ultimate community of God is transnational, transtribal, transracial, translinguistic. ... Let the church, strengthened by the grace of God, live out now, as largely as possible, what she will one day be.”⁵

Can you say amen to that?

Amen!

May our church, now, strengthened by the grace of God, live this out NOW, as largely as possible, in anticipation of what she will one day be.

Lord make it so.

The communion of saints is gathered out of every tribe, tongue and nation on planet earth – and, fourthly, it is assembling, right now, while we speak, in the throne room of Almighty God.

4. The communion of saints assembles in the throne room of heaven

The Apostle to the Hebrews uses that kind of language too. He says:

you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem (Hebrews 12:22 ESV)

Not – you will come – you have come. He is saying that if you are in Christ then you are already HERE! You are already in the only gathered church service that ULTIMATELY MATTERS! You are already sitting in your seat up there in heaven.

⁵ D.A. Carson, *For The Love Of God* Volume One, December 16 (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1998).

Do you remember a couple of weeks ago when we were talking about the ascension and session of Jesus? We talked about how **RIGHT NOW – ALREADY – WE ARE SEATED** with Christ in the heavenly places. That’s from Ephesians 2:4-6. Paul says:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:4–6 ESV)

So the communion of saints is **THERE ALREADY** – in one sense – even as they are **BEING GATHERED** there in a more direct sense as they die and leave this life on earth. As the elder said to John:

“These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.” (Revelation 7:14 ESV)

So we’re there – holding our seat for ourselves – until we leave here and go there to take our seat **FOREVER** in the throne room of Almighty God. That’s the sort of truth that can **ONLY** be communicated through an apocalyptic vision.

However you want to visualize that, the communion of saints is gathering in the throne room of God – and each individual is entering into that throne room **ONLY** through the blood of the lamb. That’s the fifth thing we want to see here.

5. The communion of saints enters through the blood of the Lamb

The elder says in verse 14:

“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.” (Revelation 7:14 ESV)

That’s such a useful phrase because it allows us again to include in this imagery both **OLD** and **New Testament** saints.

How were the Old Testament saints saved?

By trusting in the blood of the lamb! That's Passover imagery right? In the original exodus, the people of God had to shelter under the blood of the lamb. If they did that – if they TRUSTED in God's provision for their salvation, then they were saved – just like we are. All the saints of God ENTER the eternal assembly through the same DOOR. They all must pass through the BLOOD OF THE LAMB.

Sixthly, then, the communion of saints enters through the blood of the Lamb and they worship and serve the Lord of heaven FOREVER.

6. The communion of saints worships and serves the Lord forever

We see that in verse 15 of Revelation 7:

“Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple” (Revelation 7:15 ESV)

Remember that we were originally created to fulfil this very role and function. Our job was to resemble and represent God over all creation. We were supposed to be UNDER GOD and OVER EVERYTHING ELSE – and according to this passage, that is what we will be doing as a communion of saints for all eternity. We will go in and we will go out to serve the will and worship of our King.

We will be his servants – but we will also enjoy his presence and his provision forever. That's the final thing I want you to see.

7. The communion of saints enjoys the presence and provision of the Lord forever

Look at verses 15-17:

“He who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will

guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (Revelation 7:15–17 ESV)

Amen!

I’ve read those words at the graveside of many of the saints who have gone ahead of us into glory. That’s their hope and when we finish our course on this earth – that will be our sight. We will join our brothers and sisters – our mothers and our fathers – our children and our grandchildren – and together we will enjoy the presence and the provision of our King forever.

Thanks be to God!

Now, how then shall we live in the time between?

How Then Shall We Live In The Time Between?

I’ve mentioned to you before that in the New Testament it is very common to work backwards from eschatology to Christian ethics. We fix our eyes on the future and then we figure out a way to live faithfully and appropriately in the time between.

So what would that look like? Given all of what we just said about who we are and where we’re going, how should we live in the time between? I think that are at least two very obvious answers to that question. I think, first of all, we should live:

1. As aliens and strangers in this world

The Apostle to the Hebrews argues that ALL TRUE PEOPLE of faith have had this mindset over the ages - Old Testament and New. Once they put their faith in God they identify LESS with where they came from AND more with where they are going. He says:

If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return.¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. (Hebrews 11:15–16 ESV)

Are you seeing that?

A true person of faith is not trying to return to the world from which they came. They have no interest in being in charge of the City of Destruction because they are on their way to a far better country – that is a heavenly one.

Oh brothers and sisters there are so many people right now, in the ruins of the North American Evangelical church who are turning back toward the city from which they were called out to wage war and to make protest and to SEIZE POWER – but that has never been the direction of our calling. We don't belong inside that city. We were never supposed to be at home that deep inside the culture. We're outsiders. Hebrews 13 says:

Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood.¹³ Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. (Hebrews 13:12–13 ESV)

Brothers and sisters, we aren't culture warriors, we aren't reconstructionists – we are pilgrims passing through on our way to a better land. And we're heralds. We're calling out to everyone we meet, summoning anyone who will listen out of darkness and into his marvellous light.

That's our calling. That's how real Christians live in this fallen world in the time between.

We live as aliens and strangers in the world – and we live as brothers and sisters in the church.

2. As brothers and sisters in the church

I mentioned last week that a number of respected voices in the church in Canada are LAMENTING the growing cracks in our catholicity. The church doesn't feel very UNITED right now does it? We have people hating each other and slandering each other and fighting with one another over all manner of SUB GOSPEL THINGS!

Brothers and sisters – this should not be!

To a church living in times very similar to our own the Apostle Peter said:

Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.
(1 Peter 4:8 ESV)

ABOVE ALL!!

ABOVE ALL!!!

Above the need to have the right opinion on absolutely everything, above the need to get your own way on absolutely everything, above the need to win every argument, above the need to grow your own platform and advance your own perspective – ABOVE ALL OF THAT – love one another earnestly, for love covers over a multitude of sins.

Pigs fight over scraps in the mud but it is the glory of good people – of wise people – of God’s people to overlook an offense. Proverbs 19:11.

I will say this by way of close, I think that one day, many years from now, we will look back upon this pandemic as a gift from God. In the same way that nearly avoiding a car accident can make you a more careful driver, I think this pandemic – this TRAUMATIC SHAKE UP – is going to make us better appreciate and more deeply invest in the communion of saints.

And I hope its not a short-term thing. I hope we don’t have 3 months of euphoria followed by a general return to apathy and individualism. Because I’ll tell, I think this was a wake up call. I think this whole pandemic was a dress rehearsal for something bigger and I think one of the ways that God intended to SERVE US through this pandemic was by SHOCKING US into a greater commitment to community. The world is not your friend anymore, brothers and sisters – WE ARE. We are your friends, we are your family, and we are your future.

So come out from her my brothers. Come out from her my sisters and gather with your family outside the gates. Bear the reproach of Christ. Announce the freedom and victory of the cross – and love one another. That’s the call; that’s the path, now walk ye in it. Let’s pray together.