

# Written: Revelation 7:13-17 Who Are Those Saints Before the Throne?

## All Saints Sunday

Sunday, November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2024

### Text: Revelation 7:13-17

<sup>13</sup> Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> "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. <sup>16</sup> They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. <sup>17</sup> 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."

### Exegetical Statement

In symbolic word pictures we see the Church Militant on earth at any given time, all those sealed and protected by Christ in baptismal faith, He will not allow the final destruction of all things to come until all have been sealed. Then we flash forward to the Last Day when Christ returns as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We see the uncountable multitude that is the Church Triumphant all standing before Christ and acknowledging Him as ruler of all. They stand in the righteousness of Christ given to them in baptism and now the reality of their very being raised from the dead and made perfect in body and soul. They along with the angels worship and serve Christ for eternity. They live under the blessing and shelter of His reign and rule with all they could ever want or need supplied. And all the things that caused tears: suffering, persecution, illness, aging, and death are gone forever.

### Focus Statement:

We are the Church Militant now, sealed in baptismal faith and kept safe under His reign and rule, and declared to be God's righteous children through repentant faith despite our continued sinning. Christ will prevent the end time destruction from coming until all are sealed. We are there in John's symbolic vision of the Church Triumphant, made pure in the righteousness of Christ that is now ours completely body and soul. We will live forever under the shelter of His gracious rule where all needs and wants are provided for, and all that caused tears are gone forever.

### Function Statement:

#### Why it's important to know:

We can fail to realize the glory of being declared what we can never be by our words and actions: God's children in right standing with Him now despite our continued sinfulness. As we suffer through the brokenness of this fallen world we can lose sight of the sure and certain hope and glory of eternity to come, and the foreshadowing we have now in the Lord's Supper

#### What the hearer should do as a result:

Live in repentant faith now with the sure and certain hope of eternal life to come and the joyous reunion with all who rest from their labors. Understand how the Lord's Supper is a foretaste of that Last Day gathering before the throne as the Church Militant and Church Triumphant are gathered through the real presence of Christ in the Sacrament.

### Subject Sentence: You will be the Church Triumphant on the Last Day

## Introduction

**Revelation 7:13-14a** <sup>13</sup> Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” <sup>14</sup> I said to him, “Sir, you know.”

The Apostle John, who received the series of visions that make up the book of Revelation is asked an important question. It is one that is worthy for us to ponder today too on All Saints Day. Who are these people? Where did they come from? Some of you may know the answer. Some of you may think you know the answer. But if you don't know or aren't sure don't feel bad or be embarrassed. Look at the Apostle John's response, “**Sir, you know.**” John doesn't know either!

**Revelation 7:9-10** <sup>9</sup> 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 and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, <sup>10</sup> and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

Now as we begin to ponder these verses, it's important to remember what kind of a book Revelation is. It was a letter written by John addressed to 7 Churches that existed in Asia Minor. It was written during a time of intense persecution of the Church under Emperor Domitian. Emperors in the past were declared to be gods that should be worshiped upon their death. But Domitian decided that he was a god now and demanded all citizens of the Roman Empire to worship him. Christians who, from the beginning confessed faith in the Triune God alone, refused to comply. So, Domitian began to force them by making them suffer, first economically, then physically. He ordered them to be put into an arena, wrapped in the skins of wild animals, and then send in a variety of ferocious beasts such as leopards, boars, and yes, lions. The victims were required to fight for their lives, but usually lost that battle. Christians were also burned at the stake, crucified, as well as beheaded.

John wrote this Epistle from the Island of Patmos, off the coast of Asia Minor. He was there in exile for refusing to worship the Emperor, having survived being boiled in oil according to ancient historians. He would've written one copy, which then had to be taken to the mainland and circulated among these 7 Churches, who made copies so that it could continue to be circulated among Churches all throughout the empire.

It was a letter of comfort and assurance to the Church in persecution. It didn't pull any punches but revealed how the Emperor and Rome were working in league with Satan, and that the LORD in the end would destroy them. But if any Roman official intercepted a letter that spelled out all these things clearly, then the letter itself would be destroyed and the messenger killed. So, John wrote it in code, using symbols from the Old Testament and from the present time culture so that the original recipients would've understood what was being symbolized. He also used symbolic language because he is describing visions showing spiritual realities that are beyond our understanding this side of eternity. He could find the words to describe what he actually saw, so instead told us what it was like, which still fell short of the actual reality.

## **John Describes 144,000 and Multitude Beyond Numbering**

So, what is it that John describes? **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.** Whoever they are, they are standing before the throne and before the Lamb. We know that God the Father is the ruler over all things. This throne symbolizes that rule. Will there really be a physical throne when this vision becomes reality? Maybe, maybe not. With God the Father on that throne is the Lamb. We know who that is: Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He died, rose again, and ascended to heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father, as we confess in the Creeds. So, John symbolically pictures Him ruling with the Father.

So, who are those gathered before the Father and the Son? Our sermon hymn gives us a clue: ***“Who is this band before the throne of light? These are the saints of glorious fame, who from the great affliction came.”*** Also, our opening hymn describes them saying ***“For all the saints, who from their labors rest. Who thee by faith before the world confessed.”*** These are the saints who gave the ultimate witness to their faith in Christ by suffering persecution, torture, and death, rather than deny Christ. Our English word “martyr” comes from the Greek word meaning “witness” or “testimony”.

Lest we think that these are only the Christians from the Roman Empire who died in John's day, he tells us this is : **A great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages**”. What is the message here? These are not just LCMS Christians, or American Christians. These are believers from throughout history, from Adam and Eve onward who confessed the faith we have and hold dear in the Nicene Creed and the Apostles Creed as God had revealed it to them.

What else does John show us? That they are **“clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, <sup>10</sup> and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”** White robes are symbolic of holy and sinless perfection. These believers have no sin, no charges of disobedience that Christ on the throne charges against them. They are made perfect.

They have Palm Branches. Where in John's Gospel do we encounter people in the presence of Jesus Christ waving Palm Branches? When He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, and they welcomed Him as their king who came to overthrow the Romans and rule on a temporal throne in Jerusalem over the Jewish people. Except He didn't come to sit on a throne then. He came to save the Jews, and the Romans, and people from all ethnic groups and languages. He came to rule on the throne that was the cross where He saved all people from enemies too powerful for them to ever overcome on their own: sin, death, and the devil. He accomplished that in His suffering and death, making known that He was victorious in His Resurrection and Ascension. Here He now is ruling as King of King and Lord of Lords over all people.

But this gathered multitude is wearing the white robe of sinless perfection. Now even the most faithful saint who suffered martyrdom for Christ wasn't without sin. As we learned last Sunday "***All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God***". These white robes are not something that belonged to them originally or something that they manufactured by their works. These white robes of sinless perfection are the gift of grace given by Jesus Christ.

When did He hand them out? When they were baptized! That is the symbolic picture we have in the first part of our reading from Revelation Chapter 7. John writes the orders given by Christ Himself through an angel, given to the other angels in **Revelation 7:3-4** "**Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.**" <sup>4</sup> **And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel.** This "sealing" is a word picture for the work of the Holy Spirit we call conversion. This happens by His powerful work in baptism, as well as the proclamation of the Gospel Message, where He turns people from their worship of the gods of this world, and the worship of themselves, and turns them to confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. And they hold on to this by His gift of grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Now numbers in Revelation are symbolic word pictures themselves. 144,000 is not a literal number despite what the Jehovah Witnesses teach and confess. What it signifies is: the 12 tribes of Israel (the Old Testament Church), multiplied by the 12 Apostles (the New Testament Church) which gives you 144. Multiply that by the symbolic number of completion which is 1000 and you have 144,000. This represents the Church Militant, all baptized believers confessing faith in Christ at any particular time in history, including now.

## **You Are There Among That Multitude!**

You, each one of you who confessed and believe by faith what you recited in the Nicene Creed are members of the Church Militant right now. You are sealed in baptismal faith, which means all those sins you continue to commit, which should keep you out of God's reign and rule now, have been and are being washed away to the cross and to the tomb and are separated from you as far as east is from west. It is happening every time you confess you are a "poor miserable sinner" as you did at the beginning of the service and hold fast by faith to the Words of Absolution that I pronounced. The declared reality of the Holy Spirit is that you stand forgiven and made right with God by faith in Jesus. The Holy Spirit seals you in this faith and keeps you in His care, keeps you confessing your sins and holding fast to the forgiveness of the Gospel. He keeps you washing your robes and making them white in the blood of the Lamb.

You are the Church Militant now. And when your life ends in this world, by the grace of God, you are transferred into the Church Triumphant. Your soul is separated from your body which goes to decompose in the ground and it goes to be in the presence of Jesus. And there you await a more glorious day to come.

Who are these before the throne? It's you! You are there! You are in that multitude that John sees. Jesus has returned in all His glory, and He has raised your body from the grave as well as the bodies of all believers throughout the ages. He has placed you with them before Him in eternal life. This is you standing in the New Heavens and New Earth, the Garden of Eden recreated. This is you standing with all your loved ones, the saints who have died in faith before you. This is the joyful reunion that we call the "feast to come".

And what are all of you doing? **Revelation 7:15-16** <sup>15</sup> **"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. <sup>16</sup> They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.** You are serving and worshipping your risen Savior. You are doing that with all you say and do. Does this mean eternal life is one huge worship service that lasts for eternity? Not exactly. You are worshipping the LORD just as Adam and Eve did before the Fall, by perfectly obeying and fulfilling His will for you: enjoying and taking care of the Creation. And you will do this without sin and all the evil that accompanies it. That's why there is no more hunger, thirst, suffering, war, violence, hatred. You will live with your fellow man in perfect peace and unity, and in perfect peace with Creation which no longer fights against you and causes toil and pain. In perfect peace with your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and all your fellow mankind

John concludes his vision with this: **Revelation 7:17 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.**” You will live under the loving care and governance of Jesus Christ, the good shepherd. There will be no more need for human politicians or rulers. He will provide all that you need and more, you will never want for anything again. And how long will it last? Forever. You will not age or grow sick. And gone forever will be that thing that causes us so much sadness now: death.

## Conclusion

Who are these saints that are before the throne? I’m looking at some of them right now. It’s you! All of you who are members of the Church Militant by repentant faith. All of you who confess the truth of the Creeds. You live right now with the sure and certain hope of eternal life to come. You live now struggling with those things Jesus mentions in our Gospel: you mourn, you submit your will and plan to others not always demanding your way, only to see your fellow man not return in kind. You are merciful to those who don’t respond in kind. You try to live in peace, even with those who continue to consider you their enemy. You are at times verbally abused and persecuted by the world just because you live by faith in Christ. You are poor in spirit, humbled by His law which tells us we do not live out these things as He calls us to do.

You are the Church Militant, who lives now by baptismal faith that keeps washing all of our failures and sins away. And because of that God declares you right now to be what you can never be on your own, innocent of sinful charges before Him, His precious much loved children, His Church, who live with Him now and will continue to do so forever. You are the Church who are kept in this faith as your Savior comes to you and gives you **“the foretaste of the feast to come in the Holy Supper of Christ’s body and blood”**. You are the Church who gather together with **“angels and archangels and all the company of heaven”**, all those who have joined the Church Triumphant who are in the presence of Christ, even as He is present with us in the bread and the wine. He is keeping you sealed in this steadfast faith until you and I are gathered before Him with all our loved ones who died in faith to enjoy eternal life to come. Amen.