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A Sermon on Revelation 7:13–17

DR. ROBERT D. PREUS



Let us all pray.

Thanks to Thee, O Christ victorious!
Thanks to Thee, O Lord of Life!
Death hath now no power o'er us,
Thou hast conquered in the strife.
Thanks because Thou didst arise
And hast opened Paradise!
None can fully sing the glory
Of the resurrection story. Amen. (TLH 207: 2)

And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they? And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in His temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.

These are thy words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us in thy truth. Thy Word is truth. Amen.

DEAR CHRISTIAN FRIENDS, grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to His abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you (1 Pt 1:3-4).

This magnificent passage from Peter's first epistle has played a profound role in the history of my life. It was first spoken over me at my baptism. And it served as a commentary on what took place then. I who had been born dead was reborn, made alive in Christ, made his child and heir, given a living hope, an eschatology, and

an eternal future. That's what happened there. This same passage will be spoken again at my funeral, at the time of the committal. And once again it will serve as a commentary on what has taken place there, proleptically. I have achieved my hope there. I've entered the Church Triumphant. I have come out of the great tribulation. I have washed my robe and made it white in the blood of the Lamb. And therefore, I stand before God's throne day and night and serve him, worship him there in his temple.

During this Fourth Sunday of Easter, I think, our new series, which has this text as one of the pericopes, is trying to emphasize for us the results of Christ's resurrection. And here, of course, we hear about the grandest and greatest of all the results: salvation. And what is the nature of this salvation, this inheritance laid up in heaven for us? No better description could be given than that apocalyptic one in our text: "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more, neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat . . . and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes" (Rv 7:16, 17).

What does that mean? It means that the great tribulation, that awful, hectic, unhappy, wretchedly unhappy tribulation, is over. No more slaughter in Vietnam or Cambodia or Lebanon. No more tragic trips out of hotel windows. No more depressing, awful labor camps. No more clammy, rat-infested tenements and homes. No more riots, unpleasant confrontations, murders, rapes, polarization among people, even brothers. No more heresy, prejudice. No more injustice, pain, sadness, loneliness. A beautiful picture of heaven, isn't it?

And yet all that is only secondary. The essence of heaven is much more. The essence of heaven is this, that God is there. God and the Lamb. Listen to our text. "He that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them . . . the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them" (Rv 7:15, 17). That is our inheritance! That is our heaven! Asaph, long ago in the Old Testament (people think they didn't even have resurrection back then) . . . Listen to this eschatology of Asaph:

Whom have I in heaven but thee?
and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee.
My flesh and my heart faileth;
but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.
(Ps 73:25–26)

Now, I'm sure that most people don't make much out of these words. All of this doesn't mean much to most people. They spend their lives on earth fleeing God's presence, avoiding it, silencing every thought of God, evading, even denying him if they can, if

not by words, then by their deeds. They look for another heaven than God. Maybe a communist Utopia, but that's a phony heaven. Because there is no other heaven. There is no other heaven.

In the sixteenth century, a very hard controversy, a significant controversy, broke out between Ulrich Zwingli and the great reformer of southern Germany, Johann Brenz. The controversy centered in eschatology, on the nature of heaven. Zwingli believed in what he called *coelum empyreum*, that is, a beautiful, airy heaven which God had created on the first day of creation and in which God dwelt with his holy angels and saints, far above the universes. Brenz rejected this. It was a crass, unbiblical, three-story notion which confined heaven to a place outside of our universe. And he rejected it. "No," he said, "that's not heaven at all." The heaven in which God dwells is God's own majesty. The heaven which you and I inherit is God's own inexpressible glory. In heaven we don't require food or drink or sleep or place or time. The heaven which we will inherit transcends all that, time and space and every other earthly condition. That's what Brenz said.

What will it be like, then? Well, Brenz said you can describe it as the Book of Revelation does, more in terms of what it is not than what it is. But one thing is certain. God will be there, and he will be our all in all. And I like to quote him. "God," he says, "will be our all in all. God will be our heaven, our earth, our place, our food, our drink, our life, our righteousness, our strength, our wisdom, our moderation, our happiness. And what more is there," he asks, "than that? God will be everything to us. And this is far more wonderful, far more divine than anything the human mind could devise or anything that human words could express!"

And he goes on and he quotes Isaiah, whom Paul quotes in the New Testament, where he says: "For since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, beside Thee, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him" (Is 64:4).

Now why will God and his presence mean everything to us in heaven? Why will all our glory consist entirely in his dwelling among us? Have you ever wondered? It's clear. It is because we will love him so much there. This whole chapter of Revelation is an apocalyptic picture that shows all the activity of heaven, the singing, the praise, the psalms, the service day and night in the temple. All the activity is an activity of love, love and joy in the presence of God and the Lamb. You see, when you love someone,

you desire nothing else, nothing more than simply to be with him. That's your pleasure.

The person I love most in this world, you might have expected, is my wife. I never, never get tired of her. I want to be with her all the time. Every now and again, Trudy, my secretary, scolds me for not coming to school at eight o'clock in the morning when I can get the best work done. Well, I'm home, talking, drinking coffee with my wife. That's the way it is when you love someone. That's the way it is when you love God. You cleave and you enjoy his presence. And if you do, he comes to you. He comes to you. He wants to, and he will.

Listen to Jesus: "If a man love me, he will keep my words." He will hang on to those words of promise concerning that eternal hope. "If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him," and we will "make our abode," our dwelling place, permanently, our dwelling place "with him" (Jn 14:23). Now, there is nothing figurative about that. It happens. If I love Christ, he comes to me, and he is present with me, he and the Father. And they dwell in me in a beautiful, inexpressible *unio mystica*, actively, graciously, dwelling with and in me; divine Godhead dwells in me.

And this is not just something ontological. God isn't just there. It's something dynamic, operational. He dwells in me and with me, helping me, strengthening me, upholding me. He forgives me, he comforts me, "he leads me," as our text says. Right now, and also in heaven. And he leads me here out of this great tribulation to heaven, to the heaven where he is present in all his glory, where he loves me and I love him, love him not with a failing, faltering, flagging love, but with a perfect love.

Now, that is my living hope. That is my future. And that is my constant and confident prayer for myself, and for every one of you. As Luther so beautifully puts it in his little catechism:

We pray in this petition, as the sum of all, that our Father in heaven would deliver us from every evil of body and soul, property and honor, and finally, when our last hour has come, grant us a blessed end, and graciously take us from this vale of tears [this great tribulation] to himself in heaven. Amen.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen. **LOGIA**