

Revelation 7:9-17

November 12, 2023- All Saints' Day

Before Jesus ascended into Heaven, he gave his disciples a job- "Go! Make disciples of all nations. Tell them about me and what I've done for them.." That's what they did, and they were killed for it. And now, the last of Jesus' disciples, John, is sentenced to rot in exile on the island Patmos, near Turkey. What's going on? Isn't Jesus supposed to win? Isn't his Gospel supposed to change the world and save people from sin? If God is all powerful and all loving, why is life getting harder for people that convert to faith in him? Why is God letting the Roman Empire persecute, arrest, imprison, and execute the people who belong to him? I imagine that was going through John's mind while he sat in chains isolated from all his fellow Christians, all his friends and fellow apostles that learned at Jesus' feet with him are dead, and now the Church that's barely staying afloat is going to drown.

Then Jesus comes to John and says, "not quite." And in a series of vivid, powerful, striking, and bizarre visions and pictures, Jesus is showing John and all of us what's really happening behind the scenes and what's going to happen in the future- that, yes, Christians are going to struggle and suffer, but they aren't losing. God is in control, and the battle is already won. John wrote down these visions and that's the book of Revelation- and in the portion that we are reading today, Jesus shows John a special picture of Heaven itself and says, "**Look, John.**" First, "The Gospel works, John!" Second, "Salvation comes from the Lord, John." And third, "They're with me, John."

#### 1. "The Gospel Works."

The first thing John sees is this great crowd that he couldn't count even if he wanted to from every tribe, nation, tongue, and yet are wearing white robes and waving palm branches in their hands. What do we make of this? First of all, when we read Revelation, we always need to be aware of pictures or allusions to the Old Testament. One of the first things that would have popped out to the original audience is the idea of "an innumerable crowd." That takes us back to Abraham when God promised him that although he was old and gray, he would have a son, and from him would come an innumerable nation like the stars in the sky- originally that became true in the physical nation of Israel, but later on we learn that the true nation of Israel is the Church- those who have faith in Jesus as their savior and the true descendants of Abraham are those who share his faith, not his blood. God also says in the Old Testament that he belongs to all people, that people from all nations are going to be included in his people. And now, in Heaven, John sees that it's all true. People from all over the world, and yet united in praise and faith in the true God. The point is this, "Your work isn't in vain, John. The Gospel works."

Even when the culture and government isn't sympathetic to Christianity, even when Church attendance is down, even when the budget is low, even when those we invite to church don't come, even when it seems like no one knows or cares about Jesus, he is working through the Gospel and our work is not in vain. The message of Jesus crucified for the forgiveness of all sins works- and it accomplishes exactly what God wants it to accomplish, even if we don't see the result right away, and that multitude of believers grows every day, even if we don't see it. Consider this: Christians for two-thousand years have been saved and strengthened and guided through the words that God inspired through John, and he saw almost none of it. All of us sitting here today in this church are living breathing proof that the Gospel works! A group of shop-owners, farmers, tradesmen, business professionals, young, old, from different backgrounds and experiences all have come together today because we share something that runs deeper than blood, and

that is proof that the message that John was preaching produced results, even if John didn't get to see them. Consider this, how many of you, today, are here worshiping Jesus in part because of the faithful witness or guidance of a Christian that is no longer with us today? We ourselves are the fruits of someone's labor, but they don't get to see it- and that's the point Jesus is making- even though you can't see it, the Gospel that we preach is powerful and effective and it works. Who knows, a conversation you have with a friend or family member, a small church event, a visit, a hymn you sing with your child and your grandchild may produce beautiful fruit, even after you are gone. So don't despair when our outreach doesn't go the way we want, or if people reject the Gospel. Our job is to plant seeds, God makes it grow.

**The Gospel works.**

2. The next thing Jesus is showing John is this: **“Salvation comes from God alone.”** John saw these visions from God and wrote them in about 95 AD, during which time the emperor of the Roman empire was Domitian, who ended up being a tyrannical, narcissistic, ego-maniac who actually demanded that everyone in the Roman empire worship him as a god. From what we can tell, he didn't claim to be the *only* god, just one among many. The reason the Christians were so heavily persecuted wasn't necessarily because they worshiped Jesus, but because they had to refuse to worship anyone else. This caused them to be branded as anti-Rome and even “atheists,” because they didn't worship or even acknowledge the existence of any other god except their own. And they paid dearly for it, and it would have been very tempting for Christians in John's day to give in and just do what everyone else was doing, pay some worship and honor to the emperor and be a “good citizen” so they didn't lose their jobs, property, or lives. And the message Jesus is getting across is this: “Don't fall for it!” There is only one God, one savior, one Heaven, and one way to get there. We see this when the saints around the throne of God bellow, “Salvation comes from our God and from the Lamb,” and when the elders and angels and four creatures bellow, “Amen! That's absolutely true. And to him alone belongs all the credit, he alone is powerful, good, wise, mighty, not us, and not any other god.” I suppose that sounds rather intolerant of other worldviews and other theological beliefs, but this is what Jesus says. He is true, all other gods are false, and yes, I know that's a bold contradiction to what is considered politically correct to say in our culture, it was back then too, but it's also breathtakingly beautiful.

One of the elders asks John, “who are they, and where did they come from?” John says, “You tell me.” The elder says, “these are those who were the devoutly religious and moral people.” No. “These are those who tried their best to live good lives.” No. “These are those who were good neighbors, obedient children, patient parents, and nice people to be around.” No. “These are those who have escaped the great tribulation and washed their robes in the blood of the lamb.” The Passover! In Egypt, before God brought his people out of slavery, he had them slaughter an innocent lamb and paint the blood on their doors and the angel of death would see the blood of the lamb and accept the death of the lamb in the place of the firstborn son. Years later, God through the prophet Isaiah promised his people that though their sins were like scarlet, they would be white as snow, and that he would cover their shame in his righteousness. In this vision of Heaven, it says both God and the Lamb are on the throne and equally worshiped and glorified as one God, and yet this lamb's blood makes the robes white and clean. Christ is the lamb, whose sacrifice on the Cross paid for the sins of all and spared us from the death and hell that we deserved, and therefore: Heaven is not for “good people.” Heaven is for sinners. Have you sinned? Have you broken God's law? Have you hurt others? Have you lied? Have you cheated? Have you been selfish? Me too. We'll fit right in- not because we have earned a thing by our goodness, but Christ's blood has washed us and covered us

so we, sinners, can be accepted and embraced by a holy God. That's why it must be Christ and no one else, because every other God and every other heaven is reserved for those who perform well in this life. If those ones are true, I won't make it in. I have to admit, I'm so messed up that this is the only Heaven I can be in, because it's here that I'm accepted based on Christ's goodness, not my own. And there, you and I, sinners made perfect, will shout with joy, **"Salvation comes from God alone."**

3. And the last thing Jesus tells John: **They're with me.**

So what should we say about those whom God has taken from us? Often, one of the things we hear is this, "They are looking down on us." Now, if you were to tell me that about one of your dead loved ones, I wouldn't grill you on it, but as your pastor it's my duty to tell you that isn't what the Bible says. And if I'm honest, I don't want that. I think if my grandfather who is in heaven would look down on me and watch my behavior, he'd probably say to the other people in heaven, "I don't know that guy, he's not my grandson." More importantly, when *that* idea is what we use to comfort ourselves, we're settling for something far less beautiful, poignant, comforting, tender, encouraging, and powerful than the truth. Look at what John sees. The multitude is holding palm branches in their hands- palm branches were a sign of immortality because palm trees would live for 200 years in the Middle East. They are serving God in Heaven day and night- in other words, nothing can interrupt them from the joy of doing what we all were created to do- serve God with joy and freedom in his temple. Heaven won't just be a big worship service where we sing the whole time! We are going to actually work. We will have different gifts and abilities and we will be serving God with joy, and our work will be satisfying and fun.

Jesus is their shepherd- there's a reason why we say Psalm 23 at funerals: "Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." It's true now, Jesus is our shepherd, but in Heaven the tenderness and beauty of that picture of a shepherd loving, caring for, and embracing his sheep becomes more true than we could ever imagine as those taken to heaven see the one whom they've been praying to and trusting for so long is right in front of them, unhidden, and he says, "welcome home." And consider the language John uses- the joy that they have is indescribable, he can't even tell you what it is because human language can't describe it, so he has to use negatives- No hunger, no thirst, no sun or scorching heat. What's he doing? He's taking you back to the Garden of Eden, before the fall into sin. That is what heaven is- perfection itself, no pain, no sorrow, no discomfort, no sin, no death, and no tears. Those are all gone.

And if those whom you've lost and have gone to heaven were to tell you anything, it would be, "Don't worry about us. We're good. We're happy." And, "Be patient." And may be the hardest thing God asks of us. Wait. In order for your tears to be wiped away by Christ, that assumes tears are shed on earth. In order for pain and sorrow to be taken away, it assumes that we are going to have it here on earth. So let's wait. Let's wait together and encourage each other while we do that. We're almost there. How long will it be? According to Jesus, *soon*. Amen