

**Revelation for Today: Making Sure Our Robes Are Washed**  
**Revelation 7:9-17**

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Whenever there are people who share a common interest they tend to congregate in crowds. According to the Guinness World Records 23,600 people got together in Upton Park London in May 1999, to blow bubbles. The largest number of visitors to a department store in one day took place on December 20, 1995, in Nextage, Shanghai. A million shoppers showed up. The greatest number of live spectators to any sporting event was 10 million over a three week period at the annual Tour de France. The largest mass choir to sing in unison was 60,000 at a choral contest in Breslau, Germany. Seventy-eight thousand people watched Kentucky beat Michigan last year in the largest attended basketball game in history.

None of these spectacular events however, hold a candle to John's vision of the multitudes who gather for worship at the throne of heaven. Every background and breed, every country and culture, every district and dialect, every region and race, every locale and language represented on earth are present in this multitude that not even John can count. They are standing before the throne, wearing white robes, waving palm branches, and shouting, "Salvation belongs to God." What a sight! You who want to make heaven a narrow, restricted place, sparsely populated with a pious few, might need to reconsider.

Heaven is for the multitudes. And the question is asked, "Who are these in white robes and where did they come from?" Let us listen to the elder's answer.

**THEY ARE THOSE WHO HAVE COME THROUGH THE GREAT TRIBULATION.**

John Claypool tells about attending a wedding reception years ago at Wichita Falls Country Club. The father of the bride was a wealthy oil man who had spared no expense for his only daughter's wedding. Food, drink, decor, and music were all abundant to the point of elegant. The groom had played a lot of pranks at previous weddings so his friends decided it was payback time. The party was well into the evening when the friends of the groom tracked him down and threw him fully clothed into the swimming pool. The groom found no humor in the prank whatsoever. He climbed out, toweled off, and proceeded to punch one of his buddies in the mouth with his fist. Several fights broke out. When order was finally restored, \$25,000 dollars worth of damages had been done to the reception hall and the groom spent his honeymoon, not in the arms of his bride, but in the local emergency room.

Claypool said that he happened to be standing by the bride's father when things settled down. In a deep lament the father said, "When I think of all the dreams I

had for this night from the day my little girl was born, to think that it has all come down to this, I simply cannot bear it.”

Life does not always turn out the way we planned it. Fights break out, illness strikes, kids stray, and suffering happens. First century Christians signed up to celebrate the resurrection of Christ and form caring communities. Then Domitian decided he needed to be God and sent out a decree that all should bow before his image and declare “Caesar is Lord.” Christians in good conscience refused to do that. Because of their resistance many lost their lives.

Real survivors are not people who gather on some deserted island to go through contrived challenges only to be voted off at the end of the day. Real survivors are those who go through the “great tribulations” of daily life knowing God to be their hope of salvation and heaven to be their final destination. They know that in all things they are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. And that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord.

When Roman generals celebrated a victory they rode into the city dressed in white. Here the saints of glory are dressed in white robes. “Be assured,” says John, “we shall overcome someday.” Who are these people in white robes?

**THEY ARE THOSE WHO HAVE WASHED THEIR ROBES IN THE BLOOD OF THE LAMB.**

The metaphor is an oxymoron. It is an incongruent statement that sounds nice, but makes no sense, like jumbo shrimp, down escalators, United Methodists. If you want to wash something, use water, soap, detergent. Blood stained things are red not white, so much for logic.

We used to sing,

*Are you washed in the blood, in the soul cleansing blood of the Lamb?  
Are your garments spotless, are they white as snow?  
Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?*

It all sounds more like a satanic cult into animal sacrifice than a civilized religion of respectable people. Does Christian faith need to be so bloody? Yes. Blood is referred to three times as often in the Bible as the cross and five times as often as death. Blood is a Biblical word. We need not sanitize Christianity.

Is not blood the symbol, indeed the source of all life? Once a month we encourage people to give blood, give the gift of life.

As I lay in Vanderbilt Hospital day after day watching the blood drip into my veins from you and others, I thanked God for every drip. Four million red cells a second retire to the junkyard of my body and four million more leap from the marshes of my bone marrow to begin their circuit of fueling and cleansing. They travel through the narrow capillaries of my body, simultaneously releasing their

cargoes of fresh oxygen and absorbing waste products like carbon dioxide and uric acid. Blood is no longer repulsive to me. It is a vital sign of life.

François Mauriac, the French Catholic novelist who received the Nobel Prize for Literature, once said that in spite of all the church's petty rifts, compromises, failures, and shortcomings, it has at least remembered two very important phrases, "The body of Christ broken for you." "The blood of Christ shed for you." Could you use a spiritual transfusion of life today?

Several years ago, I was serving Communion at the altar rails when a two-year-old, upset over such a small amount of juice, fell to the floor and began screaming, "I want more juice, I want more juice." Sometimes when I think of Christ's cleansing power and nourishing presence made known to us in the sacrament, I want to fall to my knees and say, "Give me more juice. Give me more juice." Only the pure in heart see God for only the pure in heart have any desire to see God. Are your garments spotless, are they white as snow? Who are these dressed in white?

### **THEY ARE THOSE WHO SERVE GOD DAY AND NIGHT.**

If you think heaven is one eternal retirement plan, you had better think again. Resurrected bodies are not intended to float in space, or flit from cloud to cloud. We have work to do.

Remember Jesus' parable of the talents? The one who had two produced four and the one who had five produced ten. The Lord was happy. Remember their reward. "*You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things.*" All of that sounds like a lot of work to me.

In the resurrection we may be able to realize our God-given potential. I used to say I hoped to learn to preach by the time I die. I am now taking a longer view. I hope to have a congregation on the other side. A geologist will still be digging; cooks will still be cooking; teachers will still be teaching; physicians will be able to treat us without pain. Something better than Beethoven is bound to be written and something finer than Rembrandt is yet to be painted. Building programs will be a breeze. Many of us might take up the exciting adventure of space travel.

So it behooves us to learn to serve others down here so we will be more comfortable with service over there.

Bob Dylan wrote years ago:

*But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed,  
You're gonna have to serve somebody,  
Well, it may be the devil, or it may be the Lord,  
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.*

Who are these dressed in white?

**THEY ARE THOSE WHO ARE SAFE AND SECURE FROM ALL ALARM.**

The Lamb becomes the Shepherd over there. He will lead them to springs of living water and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Never again will they be hungry. The sun will not smite them by day nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep them from all harm.

Keep hope alive. Admiral Jim Stockdale was the highest ranking U.S. military officer in the Hanoi Hilton POW camp. Tortured over twenty times during his eight year imprisonment, Stockdale said the key to survival was hope. "I never lost faith in the end of the story. I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn that experience into the defining moment of my life." Stockdale was asked, "Who didn't survive?" The people who didn't make it were the optimists. They would set dates for their release by Christmas, by Easter, by a birthday, and when those optimistic moments came and went without relief, the prisoner lost hope and died. They died of a broken heart.

Do you still believe in someday? Are you still going somewhere?

In communion with the multitudes of heaven, let us gather at this table and take this Holy Sacrament to our comfort and make our humble confessions to Almighty God.

Amen.