

### **Revelation 7:9-17**

All Saints (Observed) + November 7, 2018  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho  
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For All the Saints

The Word of the Lord from Revelation 7:14: "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." This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear saints of God, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

A multitude stands in our text. They stand before the throne and before the Lamb. We know that the living Lamb on the throne appears to have been slain: this is Jesus Christ, raised from the dead. They are in His glorious presence, which means that their sin is taken away. Indeed, they are wearing white robes, purified from anything that would defile them and make them unholy; and those robes are white because they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Blood normally makes nothing white; but because Jesus has shed His blood for them on the cross, they are forgiven and holy.

This is the same comfort as the palm branches in their hands. People have greeted Jesus with palm branches before, namely when He rode into Jerusalem on the Sunday before His crucifixion. Then, they cried out to Him, "Hosanna – save us now!" and "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" He was riding into Jerusalem to grant their prayer, to bring them salvation. Now that they are gathered around His throne in heaven, they're singing the next verse of the same hymn: "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" They're rejoicing that the One – who rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to "save now" – *has* now saved them and won their salvation forever.

So the Lord has won salvation for you forever. He has washed your robe and made it white – with His blood – in the waters of Holy Baptism. He has marked you as His own on your forehead, sealed you with His forgiveness. The devil's got to keep his scabby hands off of you, because you belong to his Conqueror.

Back to the multitude one more time, because John is told more good news: "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. 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." Everything that was lost because of sin is restored – this is back to the Garden of Eden before the fall. The people of God are with God, and they can look upon Him and live. Since nothing unholy can be in His sight, there is nothing there that can cause them harm or grief.

That's for all the saints in heaven. They are delivered from everything that still dogs and plagues you. That's why they rest from their labors, and you don't. Take heart, though: you're in that vision too – you're just not there yet. But because you're sealed and washed white in the blood of Jesus, you're His even now. The inheritance of heaven is yours even now. Because even now, for the sake of Jesus, you've been made holy. You're a saint.

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As long as you're in this dying world, though, there is always the danger of throwing away your status as a saint and losing it all. There are a couple of big temptations that would lead you away from being among that heavenly multitude, and we do well to look at them. One of these temptations is to believe that being a saint is not about being holy, but being good – or “good enough.” The other is to believe that you could never be holy at all.

Before I speak to these, I'd like to walk through a few verses of Leviticus 21[:18-21], where God gives us an illustration of His requirements for holiness. He's giving Aaron instructions about which men can serve as priests in the tabernacle, close to His presence behind the curtain. Among the requirements, the Lord declares that a man cannot serve as a priest in the tabernacle if he is blind or lame, a hunchback or a dwarf; or if he has a blemish, a mutilated face or a limb too long, an injured foot or injured hand, a defect in his sight, an itching disease or certain crushed body parts. A lot of men are thus excluded, and it struck me as kind of unfair once upon a time, as if the Lord didn't care much for people with disabilities. Wouldn't God understand and make allowances? Wouldn't He compensate? But He didn't compensate. He just said “no.”

God wasn't unjustly discriminating, though. He was teaching; and as always, He was pointing to Christ. To serve so near to God's presence in the Most *Holy* Place, one had to appear physically perfect: in this way, God was teaching that we have to *be* perfect – in body, mind and spirit – if we are to be in His presence in heaven. That's holiness. Was God unkind to these men because He didn't compensate for their disabilities? No, because He did something far, far better: He sent His Son to take their infirmities away. When Jesus came, surely He bore their sins *and* their infirmities to the cross, so that they might rise from the dead fully forgiven and fully healed in body – and in God's presence forever. As they trusted in the Messiah who was to come, they were sealed with His grace and robed in His righteousness.

See, while infirmities and injuries and blemishes aren't sins that bring guilt, they are evidence of sin's curse. They are proof that people are sinful and imperfect; and whatever is sinful and imperfect isn't holy. Unholy people can't be in God's presence: He doesn't allow it. But neither does He forsake you. Instead, in Christ, He takes the unholiness and all of its curse away.

Christ has borne your sins and your infirmities to the cross. That's why you are holy, only because Christ covers you with His own righteousness. Because He forgives you, God declares that you are numbered among His saints.

But as I said before, there are two dangers to your sainthood, and the first is to believe that being a saint is about being good – or maybe we should say “good enough.” It's rather common for people to say, “I think I'll go to heaven because I'm a good person.” If that's you, then you're expecting God to make allowances for your sin. But God doesn't compensate for sin, and salvation isn't about being good. It's about being holy, and that's a much higher standard – it means perfect, not just above average. If that's you, thinking that salvation is about being good enough, then you probably find messages about forgiveness to be the “same old, same old” rather than welcome announcements of undeserved life. It means that you don't really comprehend the depth of your sin or the magnitude of God's mercy. If that's your temptation, then I would urge you to submit to what the Word of God says about you and your sinfulness, whether you feel it or not. And should you suffer from affliction or infirmity, let that be a reminder that you are under the law, subject to the wages of sin and in need of Jesus' healing and grace.

The other danger is to doubt that you could ever be holy. God tells you in His Word that you're forgiven and holy for the sake of Jesus, and so the devil is busy drawing your attention to things that say otherwise. He digs up old sins and reminds you of them in the middle of the night or when you least expect it, and his argument is simple: holy people don't do things like that, so

you're not holy. Furthermore, he points you to the infirmities and failings of your mind, body and health, all of which are further proof that you're suffering the consequences of sin. As death gets closer, body and mind become more frail and afflicted; and so the devil tightens the screws and tries to persuade you that, just like those men of Leviticus 21, there's no way you could ever be in the presence of God – not here and not in heaven.

You know what to do with either of these temptations: you cling to Christ, the Lamb who was slain and who now sits on the throne. When the devil tells you that holy people don't do the sins you've done, you say, "Of course they don't, genius. That's why I don't claim to be holy on my own. I'll actually agree with you as much as to say that my sins make me unholy. I'll even confess that before God! I'll also happily declare that Jesus, the holy Son of God, bore my sins to the cross and died with them. He covers me with His righteousness – having taken away my sin, Jesus shares His holiness with me. Oh, no: I don't claim to be holy on my own. Instead, I acknowledge that Jesus has died for my sins, and that He makes me holy. So, devil, if you're going to make me unholy, you've got to get Jesus to take His holiness back, and that's not going to happen."

When the devil uses your infirmities and afflictions to tell you that heaven is not for you, you point to Jesus again. You say, "When Jesus came as My Savior, He came to reverse the curse of sin and all of its consequences – that's why He bore both my sins and infirmities to the cross. It's quite true that someone in my afflicted condition can't be in heaven, which is why Jesus has promised to raise me from the dead fully healed and fully restored. Thus blemish-free and holy, I can dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Do you see, O saints of God? You're holy already, but not because of you. You're holy because you wear Christ's holiness. He clothed you in it at your baptism, and He keeps wrapping you in it by His Word and by His Supper. It's solely for His sake that you're righteous before God.

That's the comfort of the Feast of All Saints – for your own sake, and for you as you grieve the loss of those saints who have gone before us. In the past year, we've had to say goodbye to some of our brothers and sisters here: children of God named James Brekke, Robert Miller, Viktoria Pennington, Rich Nyström, Mary Van Buskirk and JoAnn Webster. We've prayed for other believers who have since been called to glory, including brothers and sisters like Noel Newhouse, Robert Gregg, Jr., Lori Roser and Martha Gascon. In nearly every case, death came as no surprise. They could feel the weakness and trouble in their bodies, and we could see it too. The devil would have us believe that this is only proof that death wins, that we only degrade and decay. But in Christ, it is not so: these, our brothers and sisters in Christ, were redeemed at the cross, cleansed by Jesus' blood, sealed in baptism and confessed Him as their Savior. We mourn, but we do not mourn without hope. They are the saints around the throne. They are among those who have come out of this great tribulation; for like you, they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

For now, you feebly struggle, they in glory shine. But you are no less saints of God than they who have been delivered. Because though you do not see it yet, but only believe, you have God's promise that you are holy in His sight; because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.