

God has given us many reasons to stay steadfast in faith through the book of Revelation so far. He has shown us his power, the power that he has over all things and the control that he has over everything in our lives. He has promised us justice, that no matter what we might suffer in this life, no matter what we have to go through, God is going to make it right in the end. And God has given us the gift of his Spirit. He has sealed us with the promise that we belong to him forever. All of those things are good, Christians. All of those things give us the strength that we need to carry on. But they only point to why we should keep going. They do not point to where we are going. And even though it's important to know why we should keep going, why we should keep running, sometimes we need to know where we are headed towards. Because then when we know what we need to be looking at, when we know where we are going, we will find the strength to carry on. Keeping our eyes fixed on the prize will give us the encouragement that we need to endure all things.

And so in the first part of chapter 7, John saw a vision of what was happening on earth. He saw the angels who had been sent to seal those who belong to God, to put a mark on their forehead to show that they belong to him. That was the gift of the Holy Spirit, as we heard last week. But now John lifts up his eyes into heaven, and he sees a new vision, beginning in verse 9: "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."

Now, we might want to ask, as John did, who are these people? Who is this great multitude that John sees in heaven? Christians, this is a picture of the Church of God, all of those who believe in Christ, just as we saw in the first part of the chapter with the 144,000. We don't want to think of the 144,000 and this great multitude as being two different groups of people. They are actually one and the same. If we want to think of them in any way, we might think of the 144,000 as the Church still on earth and the great multitude as the Church in heaven. But the fact is that they are still one Church. They're not two, but one body in Christ. One holy, Christian, and apostolic Church, as we say in the creed. And death itself cannot split up this Church. We are still united with those who have gone on before us in the faith. We are still one Church with them. And John now sees them in heaven, the Church in heaven, standing before the throne of God.

But why are there so many of them, especially when it doesn't seem like the Church is all that big here on earth? It's because of the promise that God made to Abraham to give him offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven. Think of a passage like Genesis chapter 22, which says this: "I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore." God promised Abraham that he would have offspring beyond count, as numerous as the stars, greater than the sand on the seashore. And God kept that promise. God made Abraham the father of a multitude, the father of nations, because everyone who believes in Jesus Christ by faith is a son of Abraham. We belong to him by faith. You and I, when we believe in Jesus, are the fulfillment of that promise. And now we see the Church as she truly is, as God promised that she would be: numberless beyond count.

And this great multitude is joined from every nation, from every tribe and people and language. All the redeemed from all over the earth joined together into one. Now, they don't lose who they actually are. We don't lose the things that make us different. In heaven we're still going to be Americans. We're still going to speak English. That's part of who God created us to be. But this

great multitude will be joined as one body in Christ, standing before the throne. And they will be dressed in white robes with palm branches in their hands. White, of course, is the color of victory, as we've heard many times before. It is a symbol of the victory which they have through the blood of Christ. And the palm branches in their hands are used to welcome the king. Think of Jerusalem spreading palm branches on the road as Jesus came into the city. It's the same kind of thing. And they are all standing together before the throne as the great Church victorious, the great Church at rest.

But what are they doing? They are worshiping God, joining together their voices as one. Verse 10 of our reading says: "And crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" They are singing together, singing that great hymn of praise, giving thanks to God for all that he has done for them in giving them salvation through Jesus Christ. They are joined together in one eternal worship service. You could even say they are joined together in an endless Sunday. And they are joined with the angels, with the elders, with the four living creatures, bowing down before the throne and giving thanks to God forever and ever. All of heaven joins together in that worship, giving praise to the Lord!

And Christians, when we gather here on earth together in this place, we join our song with theirs, because we are one Church. We are not separated from them. Our song is also the song in heaven. That's why we say on Sunday: "With angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify your glorious name, ever more praising you and saying: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty!'" That is their song just as it is our song too. So what we're doing here right now is a little foretaste of what is to come, a little glimpse, a little picture of what heaven is going to be like. If you want to know what heaven is like, you've come to the right place!

But of course, our worship here on earth doesn't go on forever. The demands of life often pull us away. And our worship here on earth is often not what it should be either. We get distracted. We think about other things. We might even get bored from time to time. But it is still a foretaste, that little glimpse of what is to come. And when we are in heaven, Christians, our joy will be complete. And knowing all of this, knowing what it is that we are looking forward to, gives us the encouragement to carry on, even when we are suffering many things in this life.

But we also see here, Christians, why heaven is so wonderful. We see the glory that is waiting for us. Because I think many times people have this tendency to focus on what heaven is not going to be, and they think that that's what heaven is. We say that heaven is where there's going to be no more crying, no more pain, no more suffering. And of course, that's true, and it does give us comfort to know that there isn't going to be any more of those things, that even death will be taken away. But the temptation is that when we think only in that way, we might start to think of heaven as basically being what we're doing here on earth, only without all the bad stuff. That all the bad stuff will be taken away and then nothing will be different at all. That's why you sometimes hear people say at funerals that their loved ones are in heaven now, doing the things that they love. They're hunting or they're fishing or farming or sewing or whatever it was that they loved doing here on earth, but now that they're doing that up in heaven, and they'll be doing it forever and ever. That that's what we have to look forward to.

But that's not the picture of heaven that we're given, Christians. Heaven is not earth but just better. Heaven is something more. Because heaven is being with God. It is seeing him face-to-face. Think about that, Christians. When we are in heaven, we will see Jesus. We will see his face. We will be able to touch him, to talk to him, to go to him whenever we want to be with him. We will see the beauty of the Lord and inquire in his holy temple. And what a glorious thing that will be! I can't even begin to find the words to try to describe how wonderful that's going to be. To be with the Lord forever is what heaven is truly about.

And listen to what the elder says to John in verse 15 of our reading. He tells us more about what heaven will be like. "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." God will shelter them. He will cover them over with his glory, spreading it out over them like a tent, and they will be protected forever. Nothing will ever be able to hurt them again. Nothing will ever be able to cause them sorrow. God will be like a bird covering over her chicks with his wings, because he will care for them in everything and provide for them in all of their needs.

The elder again says in verse 16: "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat." All of those things will be gone, because God will take care of all of their needs. The sun will not bear down upon them. All of their troubles, all of their sorrows will be gone forever, because God will be with them, and God will keep them safe. Nothing will ever be able to take them out of his hands again.

And the elder says again in verse 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." Jesus will be their shepherd forever. He will lead them beside still waters. But the valley of the shadow of death will be no more, Christians. It will be destroyed forever. And Jesus will lead them to springs of living water, that is, to the Holy Spirit. And he will cause life to well up within them unto eternity. Whoever drinks of that water will never be thirsty again. And the tears that they are crying are not tears of sadness. They're not tears of pain. They're not even tears of bad memories, of thinking back to what used to be. They are tears of joy, like someone who starts to cry because they suddenly become so happy. And God will wipe away those tears too. Because as Isaiah 25 says: "He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken."

This is what is waiting for us, Christians. That is what is before us. What glory will be ours! What joy will we have! Because God himself waits for us. God himself is our prize. How badly do you want that prize, Christians? How much do you want to be with him? Then run. Run the race that has been set before you. Run, not counting the cost. Run and do not be worried about what you might lose in this life. Run, because what waits for you in heaven is far greater than anything here on earth. Run with confidence. Run with joy. Jesus himself waits for you at the end!

Let us pray. Almighty God, who has set before us the glory of heaven and the prize of the upward call in Christ Jesus, help us to run with endurance the race that is set before us, so that we may finally obtain the promises you have made and see you face-to-face in heaven forever;

through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.