**REVELATION 7:9–17.** (EHV)

After these things I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing in front of the throne and of the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and with palm branches in their hands. They called out with a loud voice and said:

> Salvation comes from our God, who sits on the throne, and from the Lamb.

All the angels stood around the throne, the elders, and the four living creatures. They fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying:

> Amen. Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and might belong to our God forever and ever. Amen.

One of the elders spoke to me and said, "These people dressed in white robes, who are they and where did they come from?" And I answered him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me:

> These are the ones who are coming out of the great tribulation.
> They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.
> Because of this they are in front of the throne of God,
> and they serve him day and night in his temple.
> He who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them.
> They will never be hungry or thirsty ever again.
> The sun will never beat upon them, nor will any scorching heat,
> for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd.
> He will lead them to springs of living water.
> And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

As a parent, I have more than once had the experience that I'm sure all parents have had and continue to have: Sometimes my daughter has difficulty falling asleep, and so she'll call either my wife or me in to help her fall asleep. I don't know all the remedies other Christian parents use, but I imagine they tell stories or sing lullabies or hymns or just lie down with their child for a while, and we do those things too.

But I also like to do two other things. Sometimes, rather than leading her in counting sheep, I'll attempt to lead her in counting her blessings. And even though I am a grown man, I'm not ashamed to admit that sometimes I have gotten a little teary-eyed once we have started cataloging together all the different ways the Lord has blessed us and all the people and things he has given to us. Other times, I'll encourage her to think about heaven and try to help her imagine what it will be like.

But when you do that for others, especially little children, and especially your own children, you don't want to lie to them. You don't want to be making stuff up. So I've had to give thought to that question, perhaps more seriously than I ever have before: What *is* heaven going to be like? Is it just white robes and harps and singing? Or is there more to it than that?

This text from Revelation 7 gives us an opportunity to pause and think about what heaven is going to be like, what the souls of the departed saints are beginning to experience now, and what we and all believers will experience, body and soul, beginning on Judgment Day.

These verses from Revelation 7 come at the conclusion of some visions that the apostle John was given to portray for his fellow believers what life on earth was going to be like up to the end. He saw a rider on a red horse, representing war and bloodshed. He saw a rider on a black horse, representing famine and inflation and economic hardships. He saw a rider on a pale horse, representing pestilence, disease, death, and the grave. He saw the souls of those who had been killed because of their faithful witness to God's word. And then he saw the world come to an end and the elect believers be marked and gathered from the four corners of the earth, so that they could be taken to heaven.

And then he saw this—a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language, clothed in white robes and holding palm branches and shouting praises together with the angels. And when one of the elders, made up of the twelve patriarchs of Old Testament and the twelve apostles of the New Testament, asked John to identify the multitude, and John deferred back to him, the elder told him: "These are the ones who are coming out of the great tribulation," that is, out of all those bad things that would characterize life on earth leading up to the end. "They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb," namely Jesus. "Because of this they are in front of the throne of God, and they serve him day and night in his temple. He who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. They will never be hungry or thirsty ever again. The sun will never beat upon them, nor will any scorching heat, for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd. He will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Let's start by using these verses to dispel some myths or exaggerated impressions about heaven. More than once I have heard about believers telling their pastor or other Christians they weren't really looking forward to heaven, because singing hymns in church 24/7 wasn't their idea of bliss—perhaps in some cases because they didn't like going to church, in which case, shame on them, but in other cases because they weren't that good at singing or, as much as they liked worshipping in church, they also enjoyed the other various aspects of life. These believers had fallen prey to the simplistic idea of life in heaven consisting of white robes and harps and singing.

Now before I say what I'm about to say, let me preface it by saying that I don't think any Christian ought to downplay music and singing in heaven. I was just telling the men in Bible study on Friday that, for whatever reason, a video popped up in my YouTube feed of 500 men somewhere in Michigan singing the Common Doxology, "Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow," in harmony. Now, I don't know the context in which these men sang this, or what prompted all these men to get together and sing. Most of them looked pleasant enough, but I don't know if I saw a single man actually smiling as he was singing, and some even looked like they were bored or tired. Even so, almost immediately I had tears in my eyes as I heard them fill that church building with rich, deep, full-sounding praise. If you're not good at singing now and so you don't enjoy it, I understand, but you need to realize that music is one of God's greatest gifts to man and that you are going to have a glorified body in heaven, including a glorified

voice, and that the experience of singing with thousands upon thousands of fellow believers from every age, in a united, heavenly language, together with the angels, whose appearances alone are going to overwhelm your senses, not to mention their voices—I guarantee you it is going to give you goosebumps like you have never had before. Zephaniah even tells us that God himself will rejoice over us with singing in heaven. Can you even imagine what it must be like to hear God sing—the one whose voice is like a roaring waterfall?

Having said that, we should note, first, that being in front of the throne of God and serving him day and night in his temple does not have to mean one unending formal worship service in some sort of heavenly cathedral. In fact, what it means to be in God's temple John tells us in the very next line: "He who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them." Being in God's temple means always being in God's presence, always seeing him face to face, always having him with us, no matter what we are doing. And serving him can refer to worshiping him in a formal way, but it can also refer to everything else we do, when we do it in his name and to his glory.

Related to that, we should note, second, that especially in Romans 8, Paul describes heaven as Heaven-and-Earth 2.0, so to speak, namely, as the current heavens and earth renovated and transformed, delivered from their bondage to corruption and decay. Yes, the earth as we currently know it will be destroyed by fire, but just as earthly forest fires play a key role in renewing forest life, so also Paul gives the clear impression that the destruction of the earth by fire will be the precursor to its second, heavenly version being revealed in all its beauty and glory. This is what Luther is referring to with his quote on the second last page of the bulletin—that we'll recognize trees and flowers in heaven, but it will also be like we're seeing trees and flowers for the first time, because they will be in such a pristine state and pulsating with undying life.

This leads us to imagine a correlation—even if it is a thin correlation—between life on earth now and life in heaven. Even though there will not be death, will there still be a form of ranching in heaven? A form of hunting and fishing? Even though there will not be work in the sense we think of it now—hard, sweaty, frustrating, backbreaking work—will there still be farming and gardening, designing and engineering, building and welding, sewing and knitting, and the like? Will there be sailing and hiking and horseback riding and flying? Will there still be rivers and streams and river hills and plains and rolling hills and buttes, just always vibrantly green and filled with flowers and wildlife? I can't say for certain, but the fact that the current creation will be renovated and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God certainly suggests an eternity filled with all sorts of different scenery and activities—not just a continual formal worship service in some sort of heavenly cathedral.

Finally, we should note that the Bible itself describes us doing different things besides just singing and playing harps all the time. It describes us leading animals and playing and leaping and feasting. So yes, there will be much music-making and singing and praising and worshiping, as there ought to be. But we should not imagine heaven as only being that all the time in some sort of earthly way.

We also ought to note here the limitations we have in describing and imagining heaven. God gives us enough information and descriptions to make our minds and hearts thrill at the

thought, but in giving us his information and descriptions, he also reminds us of how much sin holds us back. Notice how so much of the description of heaven here is what it is not—no more tribulation, no more sin or division, no more tiredness or weariness, no more hunger, no more thirst, no more sweat and sunburn, no more crying or pain. So much of heaven we can only begin to imagine by thinking about what it is not and what will not be there. It is nearly impossible for us to imagine it in positive terms. We can't just say, "This aspect of heaven will be like—" and then just name some earthly thing or activity, because our sin has so ruined and corrupted everything.

But God can and does still give us a taste. We will be washed completely clean. We will be perfectly united with everyone. We will be perfectly cared for, perfectly satisfied, perfectly at peace, perfectly happy.

A couple closing thoughts: I mentioned earlier that being in God's temple means always being in God's presence, always seeing him face to face, always having him with us, no matter what we are doing. This is the main thing, the main joy of heaven. You heard John describe heaven that way earlier: He said that we shall be like him and we shall see him as he really is. Just as on a bright, clear day at noon, you can always see the sun, no matter where you are, so also Jesus in all his glory will be the backdrop of, and really the focus in, everything we do. It will be like seeing a jaw-dropping vista for the first time, except that that sensation will be all the time. Perhaps we could liken it to going to watch a game at a stadium with family members. It's nice to be with them, and it's nice to treat yourself to special food and drink, but really, you're there for the game. That is the main event. So too, we will be united with believing family members and relatives, and we will participate in all sorts of delightful conversations and activities, and that will be wonderful, but we will be there to see Jesus. He is the main event of heaven.

Finally, John had this vision and shared it with his fellow believers at a time of particular hardship and persecution. That is one of the main reasons God gives us glimpses of eternal life—to give us something to look forward to in a dark and sinful world, to set our hopes and sights higher than winning a championship or having a fantastic hunt or enjoyable vacation or delicious meal or relaxing retirement. When we get to heaven, we will see for ourselves that religion really was that important, that forgiveness really was that necessary and that precious, that our perseverance in faith and constant battles against sin were worth it, that our tragedies and tears and hardships and illnesses had a purpose, that we were not ridiculed and persecuted for nothing, that our God is truly almighty and good and gracious beyond description, that we have a Savior who loves and cherishes us more than anything in the universe, that helping our children to sleep by helping them to think about heaven was not just some sort of placebo.

"Salvation comes from our God, who sits on the throne, and from the Lamb."

"Amen. Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and might belong to our God forever and ever. Amen." Amen!