

**Introduction:**

- A. Illus.: In his wonderful book, *Things Unseen*, my friend **Mark Buchanan** writes, “I know a woman whose husband terribly betrayed her. He engaged in multiple affairs and ruinous gambling escapades that plundered and squandered all their savings. Then he left her destitute with her young children to raise, no support forthcoming. She took a cleaning job to feed herself and her children. One day, scouring a floor, she hit bottom. She was utterly alone, desperately weary.

“Kneeling on wet tiles, her entire body suddenly, unexpectedly filled with light and strength. ‘*I started to sing,*’ she says. ‘*I couldn’t help myself. I suddenly knew, with complete certainty, that no matter what happened in my life, everything would be all right.*”

“What could possibly ease her heart at such a moment? *Knowing that this is not all there is.* Hebrews tells us that those who lived by faith ‘were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. *Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them*’ (11:16)... God made us heaven-bent. He put eternity in our hearts, to pierce us, to lure us. Rich and weary both, all the way home.” [p.57-58]

- B. Sometimes Christians—especially young Christians—think of our hope of heaven as a doctrine for the elderly, and there’s no doubt it grows sweeter as the years go by. But this is the part of God’s good news we must have to endure and to be holy here and now. You will only live as a pilgrim in this world if you are confident of your home in the next. **1 Cor 15:19** says, “***If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.***”
- C. For two months we’ve been examining some of the facets of the jewel of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Here is the final one: **Our salvation in Christ guarantees us a home forever with the Lord and his people.**
- D. One Sunday after a sermon on heaven a lady talked to me in the foyer. She said, “We can’t really know much about heaven, except that it is wonderful.” Actually, we know a lot more than that! One glorious glimpse is **Rev. 7:9-17.**

The Apostle John was exiled to a remote and barren island, but on a Lord's Day morning, he was given cascading visions of the future. Among them, scenes of heaven itself, and this is one. *"I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count."* Close your eyes and imagine that. God once told Abraham to look into the night sky and count the stars for so his offspring would be. And that is what we see here.

Look again. Do you see that they are not all the same? They are *"from every nation, tribe, people, and language"* on the face of the earth. Faces dark and fair, features angular and smooth; Asian eyes and African eyes, Caucasian and Latin. Haven't borders and bitter memories, prejudices, languages, and wars always torn them apart? But now here they are as one.

They are not facing us but they are *"standing before the throne and before the Lamb."* John has told us of this throne. *"The one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder."* And there is at the same time *"a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne."* This vast multitude of peoples, who were once subjects of countless petty rulers and kings, premiers and presidents, now come as one nation to this high and shining throne and to the Lamb.

Look again: *"They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands."* All the costumes and clothes of their own cultures and countries are forgotten, all now are in the brightest white—whiter than snow. The palm branches in every hand—green against the sea of white—are waved in celebration—for a great victory has been won by their triumphant King.

Now sound is added to your vision and you hear from this vast assembly a great cry—a rolling, surging shout, a reverberating victory chant—thundering like the sound of a vast waterfall. *"Salvation—SALVATION—belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb."* **"Our God,"** they shout. Not the conquered gods of their earthly homes. *"Our God who sits on the throne"*—just as he always promised, just as they so often sang in the days before. *And to the Lamb."* The Son who sacrificed his life

for theirs. *“Salvation belongs to God and the Lamb.”* Nothing the great God has ever wrought is so great as his salvation. Look at all these people. Each a miracle of redemption. Each was lost and then found. And look at all the divisions that have been erased. Look at the white robes and palm branches of his happy subjects. That is the work of God’s salvation and the accomplishment of the Lamb.

Yet there is more to see: *All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures.*”

Here are the bright and mighty emissaries of the King, the heretofore unseen agents of God. *“They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, ‘Amen!’”* Amen to the shout of *Salvation!* Agreed! Here are those angels who sang together when the world was created, the angels whom Jacob saw ascending and descending the stairs between earth and heaven, the cherubim and seraphim who terrified Isaiah, the heavenly host whose songs filled the skies when the Christ Child was born, the angelic legions who stood ready to sweep in and save the dying Savior had he called, the bright ones who stood guard at the tomb and those who lifted high the gates of glory when the risen Lord came again to his throne. They all shout, *Amen!*

They urge the white-robed multitude to a kind of seven-part harmony: *“Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!”* It is as if they call to the multitude, *“Join us in bringing adulation and attention to the Lord. Join us in articulating the intricate wisdom of salvation. Join us in laughing gratitude and regal honor. Join us by bending all your new-found, God-given power and strength to serving the Lord and the Lamb. Amen! Agreed! So be it!”*

These angels had sung for joy over *each one* of those white-robed citizens when they repented, so what will their worship be like when we are all finally home!

John stood speechless and wide-eyed at this spectacle. *“Then,”* he remembered later, *“one of the elders asked me, ‘These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from.’ I answered, ‘Sir, you know.’ And he said, ‘These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’”*

So that is who they are. A multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language, “*who have come out of the great tribulation.*” The great oppression, the great *pressure*. It is a word all too familiar to Christians. It is used 45 times in the New Testament to describe believers’ lot in life. The world that constantly tries to “press us into its mold,” who hates the people of God because the world hates Christ. But these did not forsake their faith in Christ even under the world’s pressure. They shared in Christ’s suffering and now they share in his glory.

But more important even than their faithfulness is this: “*They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*” That’s how their robes got so white. The Lord had pleaded, “*Tho’ your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.*” They had come to Christ in filthy rags, they had come wearing the black despair of mourners with no hope. And in the unlikely bleach of Christ’s blood, they were washed clean, white as snow. They were his bride, and “*Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear*” [19:8]. That is where our salvation gets us!

## **I. OUR SALVATION HAS DRESSED US FOR THE EVERLASTING COMPANY OF GOD AND HIS PEOPLE**

**V.15** begins, “*Therefore.*” What follows are the **results** of being cleansed by the blood of the Lamb and persevering through this world’s tribulations. The imagery of vv.15-17 is drawn primarily from Israel’s wilderness of testing between their salvation from Egypt and their entry into the land God had promised them.

It is a picture every believer relates to. We, too, are in a hot and merciless wilderness where our faith is tested and tried, pilgrims on our way to a home we’ve never seen. Some of you were in that very desert this week. So that is why heaven will be so great for God’s people: **vv.15-17...**

## **II. OUR SALVATION SECURES FOR US A HOMELAND FAR FROM THE WILDERNESS OF THIS WORLD (7:15-17)**

A. Our white robes are not only the signal of our Christlike righteousness, the wedding dress of Christ’s bride. They are also the garments of God’s priests. Peter tells us that even now we are “*a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*” [1 Pet 2:5]. In our

homeland we will serve God day and night forever, a nation of priests. Oh, don't picture hushed shuffling to and fro in stony courts, muttering in Latin, and going through tedious religious rituals. Remember: we *are* God's temple, his city, and his kingdom. There will be no sacrifices to offer but praise, no duties repeated endlessly for the great work of salvation is done. We will serve God in an endless variety of ways—all manner of learning and leading and loving, but always with the very nature of servants (which so easily eludes us here). Serving God will be what we live forever to do. All work will benefit our white robes.

**Illus.: Jack Hayford**, the beloved pastor from Los Angeles, tells this story: *"It was a deeply sobering day when I came to Carl's room in the hospital knowing there were only a matter of hours to live. And as we sat beside the bedside, I said, "Carl, how are you feeling?"*

*A man of deep faith and commitment to Jesus Christ and a very experienced and highly respected lighting director at CBS, he looked at me, his eyes misted slightly, he said, "Pastor Jack, you know when you're in my business, it's the combination of lights, the skill at blending things together in order to create special effects, that's what this job is about." He said, "This morning I woke up and in the quiet of my heart, Jesus spoke to me and he said, "Carl, how would you like to direct a sunset?"* [from the CD, Heaven, in the Gaither Gospel Series, Track 14] To serve God day and night will be the delight of heaven! We cannot imagine how wonderful serving him will be!

- B. **V.15b...** Literally, he "will spread his tent over them." In the wilderness, God's tent was the tabernacle that housed his glory. But you'll remember that the Israelites themselves couldn't go *in*. Only their high priest could go in to the Holy of Holies, and that only once a year to offer sacrifice for sin. But in heaven, God will bring us into his very presence. We will feast with him. Rev. 21 says, *"Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God."* [Rev 21:4]

And there, in God's company, God's promise in **Is. 49** is fulfilled, "*Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them, nor any scorching heat.*" The wilderness will be left behind. Faith will be obsolete. Trials will be forgotten. Hope will no longer be necessary.

- C. **V.17a,b ... The Lamb as Shepherd.** How often Jesus has led us to unseen springs in this life—*quiet waters that refreshed our souls*. But there he will lead us to the very "*river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city.*" [22:1-2]
- D. Is there a more tender statement in all the Bible than the last line of v.17, "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." This great tribulation, this dry and weary land where we now live, breaks our hearts. We pass from this life with tear-stained faces. We have wondered sometimes if God realizes how hard it is now, if his heart is touched with our grief. But here, mother-like, is God's promise. I don't know just what it will be like, of course, but now, when a great relief finally comes after terrible trouble, we often cannot help but weep, releasing the sorrow and fears pent up within. It is healing to weep like that. How much more there in heaven where we need never turn back again to the sorrow, never again back to the hunger and thirst. Our tears will not just be gone. Oh no! God himself will wipe away every tear once and for all.

## Conclusion

Our salvation has secured for us precious gifts right now. Right now, we are **born again**. Right now, we are **justified**. Right now, we are **alive** in Christ and **seated** with him in heavenly realms. Right now his **Holy Spirit** lives within us and intercedes for us before God's throne. Right now, we are the **people of God**. Right now, his **kingdom** has taken hold in this dark world. Right now.

But, "*If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.*" **Jesus saves us from our sin and gives us new life so that ultimately, we may be with him forever as**

**his beloved, white-robed bride, serving the Lord forever, unhindered by the weeds and rebellion of this world.** I think that the very best part of being a Christian is that Jesus will bring us home forever with the Father.

Illus.: About 3 ½ years ago I visited two elderly ladies, one after the other, in the same nursing home. My book was just about to come out and I had written about an earlier visit to Belle. I wondered if she'd remember it as I had, so I read this to her:

Not long ago I visited Belle in the hospital. She is 95 and I had first met her when she came to the retirement community service. The Thursday evening I preached about the shepherd seeking the one lost sheep, Belle wept through most of it. I think that was the night Jesus carried her back to the flock from the wilds. When I visited her hospital room I made sure she was trusting Christ and then I sang some old hymns. "Sing the one about home," she said. So I did, a true benediction, and she mouthed all the words along with me till we got to the end, "I will bring you . . . home." [*Pastoral Graces*, p.155-156]

That day, when I finished reading that, Belle nodded and said, "*That's right.*"

On my way out of the care center that day I noticed another elderly lady I'd met on my previous visit. She was in her wheelchair in the common area. And she smiled the most beautiful smile! The first time I saw her smiling I just *knew* she loved Jesus so I went over to meet her. Her name was Jesse Campbell, and she was 93. Her husband of 75 years died the year before. When I greeted her this time, she told me she was so excited because she would get to go home the next day.

"*I bet you have a good church at home,*" I said, and she beamed.

"*Trinity A.M.E. Church in Waukegan,*" she said proudly.

"*What's your favorite hymn*" I asked.

Without a moment's hesitation, she said, "*Jesus Is All the World to Me.*"

I got down on one knee and took her hand. "*Let's sing it together,*" I said. "*We'll see if we can remember the words.*" So

there in that common room, with people coming and going, Jesse and I sang,

*“Jesus is all the world to me,  
my life, my joy, my all;  
He is my strength from day to day,  
without Him I would fall.”*

After we finished with, *“He’s my friend,”* I stood to go. *“If you’re going home tomorrow,”* I said, *“I might never see you again until we meet in heaven.”*

She nodded. *“I’ll see you there!”* she said.

And so, somewhere in that white-robed multitude, freed forever from this world’s withering heat and heartbroken tears, Belle and Jesse and I will meet again and sing of Jesus.