

Who are These?

Revelation 7:9-17

All Saints Day (Observed), November 7, 2010

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

When it comes to the great multitude that John sees in heaven the chief question is, "Who are they?" The reason that this is the chief question is we need to know whether or not we can identify ourselves in that crowd. In other words the key to understanding whether or not we are in the crowd is our key to understanding whether or not we made it. So, "Who are they?"

First of all, they come from every nation, tribe, people and language. So people are not barred from eternal life because of their ethnicity. A black person is not barred from everlasting life because he is black. A white person is not barred from everlasting life because he is white. Even though some from the opposite group may not think so it is nevertheless true that there will be people from both groups in the New Heaven and the New Earth. That means that there is no ethnic group that is barred because of their ethnicity. For example Arabs are not barred from eternal life simply because they are Arabs. Russians are not barred simply because they are Russian. It does not matter what a person's geographic origin is. It does not matter what one's ethnicity is. It does not even matter what language a person speaks. So far so good. This is good news. We will not be barred from everlasting life because we are Americans. We will not be barred from everlasting life because we speak English. That is pretty good. Otherwise we would have to move, change our ethnicity (however we might get that done) or learn another language.

Secondly, the crowd in heaven ascribes salvation to God and to Jesus Christ. The angels ascribe blessing and thanksgiving and wisdom and power and strength and all of that to God, but the people wearing white robes in eternal life ascribe salvation. They do not ascribe salvation to themselves. They do not ascribe salvation to anything of the earth. To speak in an ancient way the ones wearing the white robes do not ascribe salvation to Jupiter or to Zeus or Hermes or whatever. They ascribe salvation to God and to Jesus. To speak in a contemporary way the ones who wear white robes do not ascribe salvation to wealth or success, to intelligence or power, rather they ascribe salvation to God and to Jesus Christ. Those who wear white robes in life everlasting ascribe salvation to God and to Jesus Christ.

That is why they carry palm branches by the way. The palm branch is used to ascribe the kingdom to the king. They are waved when the king comes into His kingdom. That is why people waved palms on Palm Sunday. The king was coming into His Kingdom. He was riding on a donkey. He was riding to His death. He was riding to conquer death. They wave the palms. The people wearing the white robes wave their palms. They understand that Jesus has come into His Kingdom. They know that He is the King. They know that His Kingdom has come. Who can help but wave palm branches?

The ones in the white robes are the ones who have come out of the great tribulation. Something bad has happened to them. The vision that John receives does not tell us specifically what bad thing it is that happened to them, it just says that something bad happened to them. That means that there is not one person in the white robes for whom something bad has not happened. All of them have had some bad experience. All of them have undergone some sort of pain. None of them have avoided it. All of them have endured something awful. None of them led perfectly rosy lives where nothing bad ever happened to them. None of them led lives that were absolutely perfect in the sense that they never experienced despair or pain. Oh they experienced despair and pain all right. Something bad happened to them. They came out of the great tribulation.

They washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. John's vision later on will tell us that the white robes are the righteous acts of the saints. If the robes are white then all of the actions of the person wearing that robe have been good and perfect. They are pure. If the robes are stained or black, then that person has sin in their life. The people who wear the white robes in eternal life are the people who washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

First of all the fact that they are washing their robes at all means that their robes needed washing. These people did not start out with white robes. Who knows how bad their robes were before they washed them? The vision does not show us that. They were bad enough to need washing. It is not like they could pass their robes off in front of God without some washing. So they wash their robes.

Secondly, the blood of Jesus Christ makes their robes white. If the robes are really the righteous actions of the saints, then it is the blood of Jesus that makes the actions of the saints righteous to begin with. The blood of Jesus is the cleansing agent. The blood of Jesus takes their actions and makes them white. The blood of Jesus forgives them of their sins. We have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins. So the people who have life everlasting have the forgiveness of sins. They owe this forgiveness to the blood of Jesus.

They are before the throne of God day and night. Well, what can we say? This is where the people who have washed their robes wind up. They wind up in front of the throne of God. They are in front of the throne of God all of the time.

Now in the descriptions in the Bible of the New Heave and the New Earth it is something of open question whether or not there will actually be a big chair there upon which God sits. The throne is a sign of His power. That being the case the people who live in life everlasting will be standing in the presence of His power all of the time.

So those who inherit life everlasting are standing in the presence of His power night and day. They stand in the presence of His power to give life or to take it away. They stand in the presence of His power to blow with His wind to raise hurricanes and storms. They stand in the presence of His power to shake the earth. They stand in the presence of His power to flood and to dry out. They stand in the presence of His power to send plagues upon the earth.

They do this now. This is the kind of person who will inherit eternal life.

The One who is seated upon the throne will tent over them. It is not simply that God will be present with them. He will protect them. He will tent over them. He will protect them from everything that is harmful. He will protect them from hunger. He will protect them from thirst. He will protect them from scorching heat. He will protect them from such danger that not even the sun will fall upon them. They will always have plenty to eat. They will always have plenty to drink. They will have nothing at all that will harm them. That is how everlasting life works, people.

Everlasting life happens after God raises our bodies from the dead. If our bodies are going to live forever, they are going to need some things in order to survive forever. They are going to have to have food forever. They are going to have to have something to drink forever. They are going to have to be protected from everything that will harm it, not just scorching heat, but also cold, diseases, accidents and a hundred other things that can kill us. If God, the Creator, intends for our bodies to live forever, then He is going to have to have keep them alive and keep them from all harm.

Now there is an odd thing about those who wear the white robes who washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. If God tents over them and protects them from all physical

harm then why on earth are they the people who have come out of the great tribulation? If God protected them from all harm, shouldn't they have avoided any kind of tribulation?

Well, here is the deal. You have heard the old saying, "God didn't promise you a rose garden." It is a curious turn of phrase, but we all know what we mean when we say it. The statement is true enough. You are going to experience tribulation in this life, people. You simply are. But the vision of John promises those whose robes are washed that they will experience no harm. Well, now which way is it?

Here's the deal. If you are a person whose robes have been washed in the blood of the Lamb you will not experience harm, but you will experience tribulation. In other words bad stuff will still happen to you, but it will not be bad stuff that God sent your way to punish you for your sins. You have washed your robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. There will be bad things that happen to you because you are coming out of the great tribulation.

So the people who wear the white robes are the people who were persecuted because they wore the white robes. They were persecuted because they washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. They were persecuted because they waved their palm branches, but they did not wave them before politicians, but before Jesus Christ, their King. They were persecuted because they did not ascribe salvation to themselves or to anyone else. They ascribed salvation to Jesus. They were persecuted for those things. Whether such persecution came from a Roman Emperor or a pope or an intellectual system in the academy, the tribulation was great. They came out of it. They did not stay in it. They came out of it.

None of what they experienced was because God was punishing them. None of what they endured was because God was out to get them. None of what they endured was God trying to kill them for their sins. They washed their robes. They made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

The Lamb will shepherd them. He will guide them to the springs of the water of life. In other words Jesus guided these people in white robes to the place where they could find eternal life. He guided them to the place where they could find that their sins were forgiven. He guided them to the place where they could wash their robes and make them white in His blood. He guided them to the place where everlasting life is found. He guided them to His Word and His promises, to the preacher that He had ordained to proclaim them.

God will wipe every tear from their eyes.

You will weep in the tribulation. You will cry over the evil that you will see. You will weep over the evil that will happen to you. You will weep over the evil that will happen to others. You will weep over many things that happen in this world that is subjected to decay. You will weep over diseases. You will cry over the medical diagnosis that ends your life or the life of someone close to you. You will weep over the things that happen to you that happen to you in spite of the fact that you have washed your robes. And these things will happen. In spite of the fact that God is not out to get you, you will still die. The diagnosis will still come. Those whom you love who have also washed their robes will receive the diagnosis that ends their lives. They will experience death. In some form or another, they and you will experience death. Unless God leaves you here to the resurrection, you will experience death. It is bitter. It is cold. It leaves you empty. You weep.

God will wipe every tear from their eyes. If death is the chief cause of tears and grief then God overthrows death when He wipes every tear from their eyes. God raises the dead. The Creator restores the dead. He raises the dead to life everlasting. Once God raises the dead and death is overthrown in a way that we can experience it, there will no longer be any reason to weep or mourn or cry. The old order of things will have passed away. The new order will have come.

Those who wear white robes are those whom God will raise to life everlasting. That is who they are. That is who you are.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.