

***From Days Of Old: The Lamb Is Coming***  
***By Jason Huff***  
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***Psalm 80:1-7; Isaiah 40:1-11; Revelation 7:9-17***

Today's final Scripture reading comes from Revelation 7:9-17. May God add His blessing to the reading of His Holy Word. "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" Then 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. 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 spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor 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.'"

For several weeks, I've been listening to a series on church history in my car. Now it's dangerous to say the word "history" in church because the only word that puts people to sleep faster than "sermon" is "history." But it's fascinating. I learned chunks of it in seminary, but plenty is new to me. It tells how the people of God worshipped through the centuries, how politics and the church interconnected, and how great minds of the past still help us understand God better today.

The reason history is important is not just to know how people acted in the past. History helps us understand who *we* are now and who *we will* be in the future. History shows us patterns. History proves to us, for example, that humans are imperfect – we hurt one another, we go to war often, and even the best of us have serious character flaws. But history also gives us hope. Scripture records God's revelation of Himself over the course of human history. And the season of Advent, which we enter today, is a season dedicated specifically to history.

But it's not quite what we think. We hear the Christmas songs on the radio and we assume that it's all about looking back into the far reaches of history two thousand years ago and focusing on Jesus' birth. And it's true that we'll do that during Advent. But Advent is about more than just the nativity scene. It takes us further back to hear the cries of God's people thousands of years before Jesus came, to see that Jesus' birth was a fulfillment of centuries upon centuries of waiting for God's redeemer to come.

But Advent also looks at future history – the history promised in the Bible that is yet to come. If the events of Christmas don't mean anything *now* – if they don't tell us who we are or who we can be and where we are going – and if they don't mean anything for the *future*, there's no point in it. But Christmas tells us not only that God has walked among us, that the Son of the Father lived with us and loved us, but that God intends to make it permanent. Christ is coming again to fulfill the promise of Christmas – to put a final end to sin and to live with those of us who love Him. That's why passages from our future with Jesus are included in Advent.

To understand Advent better, it will help us to get a slightly different perspective on things than our typical one. I learned from my history study that Christmas is super important to the Eastern church – the Orthodox church (the Greek Orthodox, the Russian Orthodox, the Eastern Orthodox). In the Western church, we tend to be driven by events. We like Christmas because Jesus *came*, but it isn't as important as Easter. I've even said in the past that we celebrate Christmas because of Easter; without Jesus' death and resurrection, there's nothing to celebrate. Without Easter, we couldn't be saved from our sins; without Easter, we couldn't have faith in Jesus and spend eternity with God.

But the Eastern church sees it a different way. They are interested in the *events* of salvation, but they are just as interested in the *One* who gives us salvation. They celebrate Easter fantastically, but they know that Christmas matters just as much as Easter because it's *God* who comes to be among us in Jesus. We emphasize *God came*; they emphasize *God* came. Christmas is a focal point of salvation because if *God* has come, surely everything will be made right.

If *God* has come to dwell among His people, the rest is just details, as important and vital and fantastic as those details are. It is *God* in Mary's womb; *God* in the manger; *God* the refugee; *God* the One who lives among us. When Jesus comes, He is the eternal Son of the Eternal Father; in Jesus the fullness of the Father and Spirit dwell. And after Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension, the promise is still there. He is still Immanuel, God with us. And He will come again to take His people to be with Him. The focal point is always on God.

This helps us when we look at future history, because when we study Jesus' second coming, we want to know what will happen. In certain parts of the Protestant church, people have poured over Revelation trying to figure out exactly what will happen when. We want answers to *what*. But the Eastern church isn't concerned about the interpretation of the events of Revelation at all. The *events* of Revelation aren't as important to them as *who* brings them to pass. As we go through this Advent season, let's keep our eyes on what it is most important. It's God. Past, present, and future, we who believe, we who are a part of the church, our role is to look to God in everything and to interpret every event in the light of who God is.

I've said all that because we don't want to miss God in Christmas. You all know the slogan, "Keep Christ in Christmas." It's a gut reaction against commercialism. And I want to say "Merry Christmas" instead of "Happy Holidays." I prefer nativities to giant air-filled Santas. But sometimes we've heard the Christmas story so many times that we forget that the story isn't about the wise men or shepherds or angels or stars. It's about God making Himself known to us through Jesus, about God loving the world and giving us His One and Only Son so we who believe in Him would not perish but have everlasting life. That's keeping Christ in Christmas.

Our main passage today shows us the end result of Christmas and Easter: the fulfillment of Jesus' name in its fullness. In Revelation 7, the saints and angels praise God in unison. The endless multitudes dressed in white cry out in worship for the salvation they have received. This is a picture of us whether we die in Christ before He returns or if He comes again in our lifetimes. So let's take the rest of our time today to learn about it.

The first thing we see is this: *when Christ comes for us, our every need will be fulfilled so our focus can be on Him.* This passage gives us great things to look forward to. The multitudes in white robes – and remember, those of us who put our faith and trust in Jesus, John who wrote Revelation saw *us* in that crowd! – shout out that “salvation belongs to our God!” Our first need, salvation, is already handled.

But so many more needs are addressed. There is no hunger or thirst when Christ comes. Isn't that a wonder? Whether we're starving or well overfed, we never go long without hunger. Thirst hits us every day. No worries about those any more. There is no worry about the sun or scorching heat. Around this time in Michigan, we're like, “it could stand to be a little warmer!” But for John's audience in the Ancient Near East, there was no escaping the heat of the sun that could easily kill if you were in the wrong place at the wrong time. There is water aplenty – we're not thirsty, and yet we are led to living water, water of life, water that is permanently satisfying. There's no sorrow. There are no more tears – not that we haven't cried them, but that God will wipe them away. He consoles us and makes us whole.

These things are especially important when you consider that the multitude have come out of the great tribulation. Now this is not any one event, but the tribulation we go through as believers in our world. We all suffer in various ways. The promises of no hunger and thirst, no scorching heat, they aren't our trials but the trials of millions who have lived and died in the hope of Jesus' return. Whatever our sufferings are, they will be gone.

But the removal of all these awful things is not an end in and of itself. It happens so God can be our focus throughout eternity. How often do external things keep us from God? Why do we have to work so hard and find it difficult to find time to focus on God? Our everyday needs. Most of what we do is built around having food, clothing, and shelter. In our current world, some have the luxuries of free time or enough money to go beyond those things, but most don't.

Why else don't we know God better? Distractions. Sorrows. Conditions. Sins. Ironically, we look to fulfill our needs apart from God. Those of us whom God has blessed with spiritual insight realize that the needs of our souls can't be fulfilled through anything but God. And God promises that all those distractions will go away.

Our focus now often has to be on ourselves just to survive, but it won't always be that way. In eternity, when God makes His dwelling with us, all of those needs will be gone. No more worries about who's paying for health care or where money for the car repair is coming from. God will take care of it all so that we are no longer distracted. We can be totally His.

Here's the second thing we see at Christ's return: *with God as our focus, difficult things in this world become joys in the next*. The people are crying out in praise of God alongside the angels in worship. They are before the throne of God and serve Him day and night in His temple. If we have the wrong outlook, this looks not very fun at all. I mean, I'm beat on Sundays after a few hours of setup and practice and a worship service and fellowship hour. It's just mentally and emotionally and physically taxing. But in heaven, the people of God serve God day and night. So we've pulled a 24-hour shift through all eternity?

In one sense, probably not; with billions in the new heaven and new earth, I don't think every person will be on duty all the time. But yikes, right? For most of us, an hour and fifteen minutes one day a week seems to be challenging. How do we keep from being exhausted? Or worse, bored? This is the issue I've heard about more as a pastor than anything else – is heaven really going to be all that great, because our myths and legends outside the Bible sound pretty awful. Who wants a harp and a cloud?

But here's the difference, and we see it in the praise and worship of the multitudes and the angels. *They want to be there*. This is not by-the-numbers, going through the motions worship. This is not a 9 to 5 job. This is thrilling and exciting. The first blessing for believers is not the no hunger no thirst thing. It's not even the no tears thing. It's our service before the throne of God. This is the exciting bit! It's *God* we get to serve! It's *God* who wants us in His presence!

When I was thinking about this, I thought, “Imagine the president coming to your home for dinner.” Then I thought what we think about politicians any more and I thought, “Not a great example.” But imagine someone that really impresses you – your favorite musician, your favorite actor or actress, your favorite sports star, your favorite author or director, your favorite artist. Someone you really look up to. Imagine suddenly being asked to host their dinner party. What do you do? You clean up house, you get out the good dishes, maybe. You pull out all the stops. You'd be thrilled this person you admire would want to spend several hours with you in your house around your table. Right? How exciting! And these are just people.

Because the distractions are gone, because the sin is gone, because our needs are gone, it's about the glory and wonder and perfection of God, all the time. And He is wonderful! We serve, but He spreads out His tent over us. Literally, God “tabernacles” with us. He makes His place with us. We serve Him as He makes His home with us. We are His, and He is ours.

When you think about eternity, about the new heaven and the new earth and where you fit, think about the fact that even the hardest things now are great there. Work is good! Our work there is restful because we want to do it, because God gives us eternal rest and eternal joy and eternal pleasure in Him. God strips away our sinful desire to avoid work, and He removes the countless barriers that make good work in this life hard and painful. Jesus did the incredibly difficult work of coming to earth, living as our servant, and dying on a cross so that our eternity would be filled with joyful, enjoyable, satisfying work where we get to serve God and know God as we do it!

Finally, *when God fulfills His promises at Christ's second coming, the seeming paradoxes of life will make sense in Him.* This passage is loaded with all sorts of baffling and apparent paradoxes that are still true in Him. Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb. A few verses later, the Lamb is at the center of the throne. Thus, the Lamb is also God. God is Trinity, one and three at the same time, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A paradox? To us, but not to God.

The Lamb is the shepherd. Have you ever seen a lamb shepherding other lambs? It doesn't make sense. Humans can be shepherds. A sheepdog might be a shepherd, kinda sorta. But lambs aren't shepherds. Yet Jesus, who is a lamb in the sense that He was the perfect sacrifice slain for our sins, is also our shepherd in the sense that He leads us to safety.

The multitude of believers are wearing pure white robes. How did they get their robes white? By washing them in the blood of the Lamb. How does that make sense? Blood is red; it's difficult to get out of clothes. The image makes us a little queasy. We don't like the sight of blood because it reminds us we are mortal; Scripture says "life is in the blood." But in the brilliance of God's unique wisdom, the blood of our Savior washes out the stain of our sin and makes us completely clean before Him.

We can look at these paradoxes and throw up our hands and say, "I don't get it." Or we can see that God will make sense out of things that don't make sense to us. God is with us, but we can't tell with our eyes and ears. God loves us, but we suffer. God is and active in our world, but there is immense evil in the world. We can think of dozens more. Paradoxes make us question what we believe. How can a good God let so many bad things happen?

But God takes care of those paradoxes. God acknowledges that not everything makes sense from our point of view. That doesn't really matter to God. What matters is that God is setting everything right. He is fixing all that once went wrong due to our sin. He is planning a reckoning when He will save His people and judge the world, when Jesus comes again. What doesn't make sense now will be set straight. It doesn't depend on our understanding. It depends on God. If we trust in Him, we know that all will be well.

And that's where we close today. Christ is coming again. Do you believe it? Are you living accordingly? Have you shared the truth with those you care about? He came once to be with us; He will come again to take us to be where He is. Let our look back in time at the first Christmas over the next couple of weeks prepare us for our future with Him and convince us to live as if He had already come for us – because He has.