

"God's Saints Have A Clear Vision"

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."

In 2014 there was a movie based on a book about a four year old boy's experience of a visit to heaven while he was having an emergency surgery. The boy's name was Colton Burpo. When he came out of the surgery, he told how he was able to go to heaven and meet his great-grandmother, whom he had never met, and even a sister who died in a miscarriage and whom no one ever told him about. He also described meeting Jesus. His father was a minister, and after this happened, the movie showed him preaching to his congregation. He said that he never really believed in heaven, but after what his son experienced, now he believed.

Do you think that this boy's experience was real? Maybe it was. We can't say for sure one way or another – unless his story in some way contradicts what we read in the Bible. There have been any number of people who have come forward and said they had such experiences. But were they real? Or were they just a drug induced dream? I don't know. I wouldn't want to base my faith on someone else's experience – real or not.

Unless of course that experience was inspired by God in a divinely given vision that God wanted all of us to see. That's what we have in our text. This text is probably the clearest vision of heaven you will find anywhere in the Bible. And it is inspired by God the Holy Spirit. Even if I had the same experience as Colton Burpo, I would still put more confidence in what God says in these words than in that personal experience. So what does God clearly tell us?

1. We have a clear vision about this life.

There is one passage that I want you to focus on especially this morning. In fact, I want you to take this passage and memorize it – hopefully by the time I say “Amen.” (And I have to warn you, there are a number of “amens” in the sermon text today, so be careful you don’t jump up every time I say “amen.”) Here it is. **“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.”**

Children, do you know what the word “tribulation” means? It means trouble. It means that some people are born with handicaps that make life really hard for them. It means that there are sicknesses in this world that can make people really sick and even cause them to die. Maybe you’ve heard about the ZIKA virus and that the mosquito that carries it is already in the lower half of the United States. That’s scary, isn’t it? Trouble is heading our way. Tribulation means you may have a bully in your class that is constantly teasing you. It means that you may not be the smartest kid in your class and it’s really, really hard for you to study. Maybe you have a grandmother whose hands are all crippled up with arthritis and she lives with pain every single day. Or maybe your dad got fired from his job and now he can’t find work, and it is really hard for your family to pay the bills. There is not a single day in your life where you won’t run into some kind of trouble or another.

Where does all that trouble come from? It comes from the day when Adam and Eve committed the first sin and sin brought all kinds of trouble into the world. Remember what God told Adam and Eve after he promised them a Savior? Eve would have all kinds of trouble raising children. Adam would have all kinds of trouble raising his crops. And in the end, they would both grow old and die. That’s the way life is. It’s filled with trouble.

Unfortunately, we live in a world, and this is especially true of our culture in this country, which believes that people should never be poor, that people should never have to endure pain, that people should never experience any kind of trouble in any way. That’s a nice thought, but it isn’t real. We will never get to experience heaven on earth! What is real is that every day we live in this world brings some kind of trouble. That’s one of the major themes of the book of Revelation. God wants his people to be ready to face the hard truth that life is hard and filled with trouble.

In fact, one of the BIG revelations in the book of Revelations is that Christians will experience even more trouble than most people. Did you hear what happened in Pakistan on Easter Sunday morning? A suicide bomber went to a park where Christians had gathered to celebrate Jesus’ resurrection. Sixty-nine people were killed and three hundred forty-one were injured, most of them women and children. These things are happening in Africa and Asia and in many parts of our world. In this country, we have freedom of religion, but you can expect to be ridiculed if you really believe what the Bible says. **“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.”**

Friends, this doesn’t sound like very good news to us today. It is reality. If we are not clear about this, then the devil will only set us up for disappointment. He will use our discouragement to make us doubt God’s love or even worse, to stop loving God altogether. Much of my ministry over the last thirty-seven years has been counseling with people in those times of discouragement in their lives. Maybe if we can just see clearly as God shows us again this morning that life will not be a bed of roses, then maybe we will be ready for it.

Have you ever gone to the doctor or to the dentist, and he says, “Now this might hurt.” Why does he say that? He says it because he wants you to be ready and not be taken by surprise. God does the same things. He warns us of the troubles in this life so that we can be ready for them.

"These are they who have come out of the great tribulation ..." And to give us hope, God gives us a clear vision of heaven.

2. We have a clear vision of heaven.

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." This is such a comforting verse. I cannot imagine holding a more precious thought in front of my eyes on the day of my death than this verse gives me.

There isn't a person here today that feels like one of God's saints! You feel like sinners. You argued with your spouse this week. You let your mind dwell on sinful things. In fact, you know that your heart sometimes feels like cesspool of sinful desires. The fact that you complain so much only uncovers the ugly fact that deep inside you desire things you can't have or don't have or that God in his wisdom hasn't given you. Instead of being thankful for the blessings you have, you complain about what you don't have. You are jealous of your neighbor, who has a bigger house, or nicer car. You are jealous of your classmate, who gets better grades or who starts on the basketball team. Often you don't even see all these sinful desires raging in you. But sometimes, like right now, you see clearly. You see your heart for what it is. Sinful. Disgusting. Corrupt.

You don't feel like a saint – but that is what you are. You have washed your robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. That Lamb is Jesus. Why does the Bible call Jesus the Lamb? Because in the Old Testament, if you sinned, you would bring a lamb to the altar. The priest would take it's blood and sprinkle the altar and sprinkle you and then you would be clean. The blood of that lamb didn't REALLY take away your sins. It only looked ahead to Jesus. His blood can wash away your sins completely. And if Jesus has washed away your sins, what does that mean? It means you are holy before God. You are a saint.

Saints belong in heaven, don't they? Well, you are already a saint by faith in Jesus, and there is nothing more certain than this, that you will go to heaven someday. What will heaven be like? I've never been there, and I don't know if Colton Burpo was really there. But God gave John a glimpse into heaven, and he tells us what heaven is like. He says, **"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."** It says that God spreads his tent over them. This is a middle eastern way of saying that God takes us into his home. I have been with many saints in the closing hours of their lives, and so many of them have expressed this to me. "I'm ready to go home," they say. They are lying in their own bed and they are in their own home, and still they say, "I want to go home." Home is where you belong. Home is where you are always accepted. Home is where you are always loved. We will always be strangers here, in this world of trouble, because heaven is our home.

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." At the end of the Tales of Narnia, C.S. Lewis described this whole new world

waiting for us. *"The things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. ... But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page; now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read; which goes on forever, in which every chapter is better than the one before."*

We are looking forward to a place where that the Lamb of God who died for us, rose again and reigns victorious will be our Shepherd and lead us to springs of living water. Can you see clearly the Shepherd leading his sheep up into the mountain heights? He knows the valleys so beautiful they will bring tears to your eyes. He knows where the grass is lush and green. There is cool shade, and there is water flowing fresh and cold from mountain springs. He will take us to places where he will wipe away every tear from eyes.

Are you seeing clearly what God has prepared for those who love him and have been called according to his purpose? Keep your eyes on heaven and your life here cannot disappoint you. There is one more thing in our text.

3. We have a clear vision of our mission.

Let's look again at this crowd in heaven from the clear perspective of the vision that John saw in our text. **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."** Notice that the saints in heaven are singing a salvation song. They acknowledge with thankfulness in their hearts and with praise before their family in heaven that salvation doesn't belong to them but to God. God did it all. Jesus did it all.

Second, notice who belongs to that crowd. It is a wonderful mix of people from every nation and tribe and people and language. Five times this phrase is repeated in the book of Revelation. In the minds and hearts of God's people, there is no reason for racism or regionalism or shortsightedness of mission of any kind. God's our Savior wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

Friends, you have a salvation song to sing, and you don't have to wait until you get to heaven to start singing it. You can sing it to your children every day while they are growing up so that they learn this song well. You can sing this song to your grandmother in the nursing home as you give her comfort and strength as she faces her journey to heaven. You can sing this song in your work place, even though there are work places where you are not permitted to tell the story of Jesus. But you will find a way anyway, because that's what saints do. You can sing this song on your college campuses even though it is not politically correct to do so. That's what saints do – they sing salvation songs. They cannot help themselves.

When we studied this text together on Tuesday, Pastor Rauh shared something he heard. A pastor said, "For unbelievers, this life is as close as they will get to heaven. For believers, this life is as close as they will get to hell." We get it, don't we? Life will be a place of trouble. Heaven will knock our socks off. And our mission is to bring along as many people as we can.