

Will the Saved be Few?

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson at The Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on April 20, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, 1986: Scripture Lessons: Acts 13:15-16, 26-33; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

When I was growing up I was taught that very few people would ever make it to heaven. This belief hung around my neck like an albatross. It was depressing. If God was good and all loving how-- why-- would he create a world where the vast majority of men and women created in his image would perish everlastingly in hell? Why, if God is all powerful, would he not choose to save many rather than only a few? The answer, I was told, is that God is glorified by the destruction of the wicked. The damnation of the lost was meant to demonstrate the holiness and justice of God. These answers never fully satisfied me. This belief that most people would be lost also undermined my own assurance of being loved and accepted by God. If the vast majority of people were lost there was a good statistical chance that I would be also.

But, as I grew older and began to read the Bible on my own, I came across this passage in the book of Revelation depicting "a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb". This and many other passages slowly led me to come to believe in the immeasurable greatness of God's love that will, in the end, save a great multitude that no one can number.

When John saw this vision of heaven there was very little evidence to support it. The church was small and Christians were few. They were also under heavy persecution due to the decree of the emperor Domitian that he was to be worshiped as a God. Christians were going through severe

tribulation. Some had been martyred. Anxiety and doubt filled their hearts. They thought, "Will I make it through this tribulation without denying Christ?" Or worse yet they would ask, "Have I committed my life to an illusion? Will God's purposes for this world be defeated?"

John's Revelation, then, was not written to give us who are living today details about the future. He was writing to fellow Christians living in the first century, under persecution, to assure them that God would rescue them out of the great tribulation and that God's purpose to save the whole world would be realized.

But what does this have to say to us today? John's vision of this innumerable multitude in heaven does so much to encourage me. *// means, first of all, that there's a real life beyond the grave.*

God's purpose is not simply that we survive death but that we live in his presence. God will give security and fulfil our most profound needs. God will give us meaningful service, and we'll continue to make progress as we follow the Shepherd Lamb to springs of living water. Of course the language is symbolic. John uses human language to attempt to describe something entirely beyond human experience.

In the twentieth century many Christians have apparently lost any vision of heaven. Many people are convinced that belief in a future life keeps individuals from working to improve conditions in this life. Yet the human destiny of the vast majority of men and women will not be fulfilled at all unless in some future life. John, therefore, gives us a vision of a great multitude which no one can number who have attained, through Christ, fulfilment of their human destiny in a real life beyond the grave. Because we believe in God; because we believe that Christ rose from the dead; because the Holy Spirit gives us a foretaste of eternity in our

present lives we believe in a fulfilling life beyond the grave in the service of God.

Secondly, John's vision of an innumerable multitude at worship in heaven means that the church is far more inclusive than we've sometimes thought. When I was a child I had a very narrow vision of the church. I was taught that the vast majority of men and women were going to hell *including* most church members. Roman Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Lutherans were, for the most part, lost in false doctrine, formalism and nominal Christianity, trying to earn their salvation by good works. And charismatic Christians, I was taught, were deluded by Satan. But as I grew older and met wonderful Christians in all these churches my vision of the kingdom of God expanded. I began to appreciate the diversity within the church. A person doesn't have to believe exactly what I believe or worship exactly as I do or wear the same denominational label as I do. I have come to see real beauty and strength in the diversity and breadth of the church. The vision of John, then, gives us a broader vision of the church which will hopefully allow us to accept all those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior as a brother or sister in Christ.

Thirdly, John's vision means that the good news is far better than we've sometimes realised. Clearly our text invites us to think of the immeasurable greatness of the love of God. God's love for the world isn't a miserly love. It's a love that will encompass a multitude so great that they're beyond counting. He's not a God who lets the vast majority of people who've ever lived perish everlastingly. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God but God's grace is greater than our sin. God doesn't have to let the vast majority of people perish in order to show his

holiness. His holiness is demonstrated clearly in the cross of Christ where sin was punished once and for all.

If, then, we believe that God intends to save a great multitude which no one can number we'll witness to the good news of Christ with more confidence. We don't have a stingy Gospel which goes to people and says, "God loves a very few people of whom you may possibly be one and Christ *may* have died for you." Too often we present the gospel to the world like the pastor in C.S. Lewis's novel, *The Pilgrim's Regress*. He says to a young man who comes to him to talk about God, "God loves you very, very much and will certainly send you to hell on the slightest pretext." We, rather, have truly good news. We can go with confidence with the good news that God's love is for the whole world, and that God has given to his Son a great multitude which no one can number.

Fourthly, John's vision gives us personal assurance. We may not be experiencing persecution and martyrdom today but this whole earthly life contains tribulation. John's vision gives me confidence that God will also deliver me and my loved ones safely through the temptations, dangers, and pit-falls of this world

"Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

To summarize then, John's vision of this great multitude which no one can number means that there's real life beyond the grave; it means that the church is far more inclusive than we sometimes imagine; it means that the good news is far better than we sometimes present it; and it means that God's people can be confident that God will bring us personally through the dangers and temptations of this world to heaven.

But I must issue one word of caution. St John of the Revelation is told

that this great multitude which no one can number are those "who've washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." Is it possible that some may not want to wash their robes? Christian doctrine has always urged that eternal life is something which may conceivably be missed. It's not reasonable to tell people that they must wash their robes and make them white through repentance and faith in Christ, if we also tell them that the obligation has no eternal significance. The traditional Christian doctrine of hell is actually one of the strongest affirmations of human free-will known to human thought because it contemplates the possibility of one of God's creatures being able to say "No, I don't want to wash and be made clean by the blood of Christ. No, I don't want to listen to the voice of Christ; I certainly don't want to serve God day and night and I don't want to follow Christ to streams of living water."

But, to end on a more hopeful note, we believe that whoever, by the grace of God, turns towards God in this life, wherever and whenever they may live, can share in his eternity. And, therefore, it's our chief responsibility, duty and delight to turn to God as he's revealed in Jesus Christ, to listen for his voice, and to follow where he leads.

Amen

Let us pray: O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads; who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

For the main point of this sermon I am indebted to Benjamin B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies*, chapter XII: "Are They Few That Be Saved?" Also Supplement: Sermons: Chapter I. God's Inmeasurable Love. And Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. III.