

Who Are These?

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Preacher: Rev. Murdo M Campbell

- [0 : 0 0] Well, if we could, this evening, for a short while, with the Lord's help and the Lord's enabling, if we could turn back to that portion of the scripture that we read, Revelation chapter 7, continuing our study in this book, or this apocalyptic book.
- Revelation chapter 7, and I want us to read again at verse 13. Revelation 7 at verse 13. Then one of the elders addressed me, that is John, saying, Who are these clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?
- I said to him, Sir, you know. And he said to me, These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.
- Last Tuesday evening, I was clearing a pile of papers on my desk when this fell out from among them.
- It's the order of service for the funeral of the late Professor Donald MacLeod. He died on Thursday the 21st of May this year, aged 82.
- [1 : 1 8] And on the back of the order of service, maybe if you were at the funeral, you might have received one. But on the back of the order of service, there's a little transcript from the monthly record. And it was the last article that Professor MacLeod wrote as the editor when he was the editor back in 1990.
- And he wrote in this article on the nature of heaven. And Professor MacLeod, he concluded the article by writing, this is what he said. He said, And it was an email from the Gospel Coalition.
- And it was an email to do with the memorial service for Dr. Tim Keller. He had passed away two days before Professor MacLeod on Tuesday the 19th of May, aged 72.
- So he was 10 years younger than Professor MacLeod. Tim Keller, if you don't know much about Tim Keller, he was a church planter and also a pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York.
- He was an author of many different books, many challenging books. And he was also a very influential speaker. And like Professor MacLeod, Tim Keller was one of the great men and great minds of our generation.
- [3 : 0 0] But the amazing thing is, these men not only passed into glory two days apart, they lived on two sides of the Atlantic, and yet they served the same saviour all the days of their lives.
- And so I watched Tim Keller's memorial service. I watched it that Tuesday evening. And during the service, Tim Keller's wife, Kathy, she spoke for a few minutes. And when she spoke, Kathy discouraged, she discouraged everyone from visiting her husband's grave, because some might be tempted to do.
- And so she said to them, I don't want you to do what you often see in the movies, where someone is having this heart-to-heart, standing at a headstone of the deceased person. She said, I wouldn't be comfortable with that, because Tim isn't there.

Tim is with Jesus. Tim is healed, loved, more alive, and happier than he has ever been. And you know, it also reminded me of what another minister said, the 19th century evangelist D.L.

Moody. He once said, he said, someday you will read in the papers that D.L. Moody of East Northfield is dead. Don't you believe a word of it? At that moment, I shall be more alive than I am now.

[4 : 19] I shall have gone up higher. And my friend, it's up higher that I want us to look this evening. Because as you know, the book of Revelation, the whole purpose of this book is to call us to stop looking inward and to start looking upward and to keep looking upward.

And this evening, we're looking upward to see the church triumphant in glory. And as we do so, I want us to ask this two-part question that one of the 24 elders asked John.

That question there in verse 13. Who are these clothed in white robes and where have they come from? Who are these clothed in white robes and where have they come from?

So the first part of the question is, who are these? Who are these? And we're told there in verse 9. After this, I looked and behold a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

Now, if you were here last Wednesday evening, we were considering the first half of Revelation chapter 7. And as we said, verses 1 to 8, they form this interlude, an interlude in the unfolding and unveiling narrative of the book of Revelation.

[5 : 59] Because as we said before, the book of Revelation, it's one long revelation. It's not revelations, it's revelation. And it's a revelation from Jesus Christ, about Jesus Christ, and it's for us, it's for the church of Jesus Christ.

And as we said, the book of Revelation can be compared, we mentioned this last week, compared to Russian nesting dolls. You know, the dolls where there's one inside the other and you open it out and you see what's inside the next one.

And I was actually informed after the service last week, and I hope I pronounce the proper name that I'm going to say, Matryoshka. Matryoshka. Is that right? Sort of. I was actually looking it up.

It's also Babushka, which is Russian for grandmother. And so the book of Revelation, we said it was like Russian nesting dolls because it has many layers to it.

In fact, we said that there are seven layers to the book of Revelation because there are seven cycles in this revelation. With each cycle, it reveals more and more about Jesus Christ, who is the risen, ruling and reigning king who is going to return.

[7 : 07] And each cycle, we said, it's introduced by the phrase, after this. After this. The first cycle, it's found in Revelation chapters 1 to 3.

Then the second cycle is found in Revelation chapters 4 to 6. Then the third cycle begins at the beginning of chapter 7. In verse 1, it says, After this.

After this, I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on the earth or sea or against any tree.

And as we said last week, what John sees in verses 1 to 8 is the church militant. It's the church militant, which is the church on earth as it engages in fighting the good fight of faith.

Paul reminds us, as the church militant, he reminds us that we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the spiritual wickedness in high places, which is why Paul calls us to put on the whole armour of God that you may be able to stand firm.

[8 : 15] And what John sees in the first half of chapter 7, in verses 1 to 8, he sees the church militant. But what he sees about the church militant is that we don't stand firm in our own strength.

We stand firm because we're sealed with the seal of the living God. So we don't stand firm in our own strength. We stand firm because we're sealed with the seal of the living God.

And as we saw, we saw that the seal of the living God, it's a seal of sovereignty, a seal of security, and it's a seal of surety. It's a seal which has been set, as we read, upon the four heads of the 144,000, which is a symbolic number of all of God's sealed and Spirit-filled people throughout history.

Whether Jew or Gentile, they are part of the church of Jesus Christ in the world, and not one of them will be lost. That's the purpose of it.

Not one of them will be lost. Therefore, the seal of the living God is a gift and a guarantee to each and every one of the Lord's people that the church militant will be made perfect in holiness and immediately pass into glory.

[9 : 33] And with that, we're told, verse 9, that another cycle begins. Another cycle begins because it says, after this. After this, I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands.

But, you know, what we need to understand is that the interlude of the previous cycle, verses 1 to 8, it's now come to an end with this second after this in verse 9.

And what we're seeing in verse 9 onwards is that it's actually picking up from where it left off at the end of chapter 6. Because John sees, once again, verse 9 onwards, he sees the throne of heaven.

And what has been described to us from the previous cycle is a throne with one seated upon the throne with a sovereign scroll in his hand. And around the throne, there are 24 elders with golden crowns on their heads.

And on each side of the throne, there are these four living creatures. And then above the throne, we're told that there was the voice of many angels, numbering myriads and myriads and thousands of thousands of angels, saying with a loud voice, towards the one in the centre of the throne, worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing.

[11 : 09] And so as we begin this next cycle, John no longer sees the church militant fighting the good fight of faith. He now sees the church triumphant in glory as they are standing before the throne of God.

And what John sees and what John says about the church triumphant is that they are a multitude, a great multitude that no man or no one could number.

They are a multitude which no man can number. And that's emphasised because what's remarkable is that God has numbered them and God has named them.

God has numbered them and God has named them. We saw that from the numbers in the previous section. The 144,000, they're all numbered, they're all named.

And you know, if it can be said of Psalm 147, which we were just singing, if it can be said that God has numbered and named every single one of the stars in the night sky, then it can be said surely that God has also numbered and named every one of his own people.

[12 : 27] Because you know, when you go back through your Bible, right back to the beginning of beginnings, the book of Genesis, that was the promise that was given to Abraham. God covenanted himself, God committed himself to Abraham, promising that through your seed, through his seed, all the nations, all the families, all the peoples of the earth would be blessed.

And the Lord said to Abraham, I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven. I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven.

And you know, what's a beautiful promise, what's beautiful about that promise is that God knows the number of the stars. He has named them every one.

Therefore, God knows the number of this great multitude in heaven because he has effectually called each and every one of them. And he has called them all by name.

God has numbered them and God has named every single one of his people. And the emphasis is that none will be lost. None will be lost.

[13 : 39] All those whom, as Jesus said, all those whom the Father hath given me, none of them will be lost because he alone has the power and authority to number and name his people.

And you know, this is what we actually miss in our English translations because what John sees here, what John says to us here is the emphasis is on the no man.

No man. No man, he says, has the power. That's what he literally says. No man has the power or the authority to name or number this great multitude in heaven apart from the one seated on the throne.

That's why John looking could say, this is what he says, I looked and behold a great multitude. No man can number this. But God knows the number and God knows the name of every single one of them.

And you know, what John is actually seeing here, what John is saying here is the fulfillment. It's the fruition of God's covenant commitment to Abraham. It's all going back to this great covenant of grace.

[14 : 49] God's promise that all the nations, all the peoples, all the families of the earth would experience and enjoy the blessing of salvation. In fact, what John saw was the fulfillment of what we were singing in Psalm 100.

Psalm 100, as we said, it's the great missionary psalm. It emphasizes God's covenant commitment to his people that all people that on earth do dwell would sing to the Lord with cheerful voice.

and here's the fulfillment of that. Here's the fulfillment of God's covenant commitment, God's covenant faithfulness that gathered around the throne of God and before the Lamb is this elect multitude which God has numbered and God has named and we're told that they're from every nation, they're from every tribe, they're from every people group and they speak every language that was on the earth.

and John tells us they're all crying out. What's remarkable is that they're from different nations, they're different peoples, different languages and yet they're all crying out, they're all singing out, they're all directing their praise with one voice to one place and they're all rejoicing saying salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb. You know, I always love reading what John Newton wrote about this multitude in heaven.

[16 : 29] John Newton, as you know, he was the man who penned that amazing hymn, amazing grace and yet John Newton said, if I get to heaven I shall see three wonders there.

The first wonder will be to see many people whom I did not expect to see there. The second wonder will be to miss many people I did expect to see there.

And the third wonder, he says, is the greatest wonder of all that I will find myself there. The greatest wonder of all is that I will find myself there.

A part of this great multitude that no man, no man can number. So as we look up to see the church militant in glory, the first part of the question is, who are these?

Who are these? But then the second part of the question is, where have they come from? Where have they come from? We'll read again in verse 13.

[17 : 33] Then one of the elders addressed me saying, who are these clothed in white robes and from where have they come? I said to him, sir, you know. And he said to me, these are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.

They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. I'm sure you've heard the question being asked before, probably in a fellowship or in a gathering.

Will we know one another in heaven? Will we know one another in heaven? A favourite question, I'm sure. And that question is often answered based upon the occasion when Peter, James and John, they had their mountaintop moment on the top of the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus.

Because without being introduced to the figures who were there, the disciples, Peter, James and John, they recognised these heavenly figures who are with Jesus. They recognised them to be none other than Moses and Elijah.

But you know, that age-old answer is called into question here, especially verse 13, when one of the 24 elders who is already in heaven, who sees this great multitude, he questions the identity of the innumerable multitude.

[18 : 52] He says, who are these? Who are these clothed in white robes? And where have they come from? Who are these clothed in white robes and where have they come from?

But you know, what we have to see is that the elder isn't actually questioning the identity of this multitude that God has named and God has numbered. It's not that he doesn't know who they are.

He's asking this rhetorical question because the identity of the multitude in heaven should be so obvious. And it is obvious to everyone who they are and why they're there.

That's why John says, he goes on to say in verse 14, Sir, you know. To which the elder responds, yes. He says, yes, these are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.

They've washed their robes, they've made them white in the blood of the Lamb. These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They've washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

[19 : 55] And I don't know if you noticed, but this is now the second time in only a few verses, the second time in only a few verses that the church triumphant is described as being clothed in white robes.

It's there in verse 9, they're before the throne with the Lamb clothed in white robes. And then again in verse 14, they washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

And it not only emphasizes the perfection and purity of the church triumphant and also the holiness and the happiness of the church triumphant. It also explains that they have been made white, they've been washed as white as snow through the blood of the Lamb.

They're all redeemed, they're restored, they're renewed. And as Peter says, it's not by corruptible things such as silver and gold, but it's all by the precious blood of Christ as of a Lamb without blemish and without spot.

Each and every one of them. This named and numbered multitude, they have all come to know and experience the blood of Jesus Christ cleansing them from all sin.

[21 : 04] They're washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb. But the other description that's given of the church triumphant is where they've come from.

Because the elder says they have come out of the great tribulation. They have come out of the great tribulation. And in verse 9, John not only sees this named and numbered multitude clothed in white robes, he also sees that they have palm branches in their hands.

They have palm branches in their hands and palm branches, they were a symbol of celebration. We see that in the triumphal entry of Jesus on Palm Sunday.

Jesus, he rides into Jerusalem on a donkey and the crowds go before him. They're laying before him branches on the road, palm branches. And as they're laying them on the road, they're all singing, Hosanna, salvation.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. But palm branches, they were also a symbol of celebration because they related back to the Feast of Tabernacles.

[22 : 12] Do you know the Feast of Tabernacles? It was a Jewish feast during which the Jews, they would all take palm branches. and they would make little tabernacles. They would make tents or succas as they were called.

And they would live in these tents during the Feast of Tabernacles. And they would live in these tents in order to commemorate and celebrate the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites.

Because you remember the Israelites for 40 years, they had been rescued and redeemed from slavery and bondage in Egypt. They'd been brought safely through the Red Sea into the wilderness.

And there for 40 years they lived in temporary accommodation. They lived in these succas, these tents. And they worshipped the Lord in a tent, at a tent, the tabernacle, for 40 years.

And yet the Lord provided for them every step of the way. He provided manna from heaven and water from the rock. And he provided for them all the way until they crossed the river Jordan into the promised land until they would worship there in Jerusalem at a permanent structure at the temple.

[23 : 20] And as you know it's a picture and it's a portrait of the Christian life. The experience of the children of Israel from Egypt to the promised land is a picture and portrait of the Christian life.

We have been redeemed and rescued from slavery to sin. This world is a wilderness. And sometimes it's a dark and difficult wilderness, which we have to navigate our way through.

And Jesus has told us that in this world you will have much tribulation. There will be struggles. There will be struggles with sin and Satan and sickness and suffering and sorrow.

There will be grief and groaning. There will be heartache and heartbreak. There will be conflict and contention. There will be obstacles and opposition. There will be trials and tribulation.

In this world, says Jesus, you will have much tribulation. But take heart. Don't you love those words? Take heart. I have overcome the world.

[24 : 26] It is through much tribulation that you will enter the kingdom of heaven. And you know, it was into that context and that picture and portrait of the Christian life being from Egypt to the promised land that Paul reminds us.

At the end of 2 Corinthians 4 into 2 Corinthians chapter 5 Paul says our light affliction. It is but for a moment.

Why? Because it's working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. While we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen here, they are temporal.

But the things that are unseen and that are yet to come, they are eternal. And in this wilderness, you go into chapter 5, in this wilderness, Paul says we groan in this earthly tent.

That is our body. We groan in it. But we know that if this temporary tent is destroyed, we have the hope of a building made from God.

[25 : 28] A house not made with hands. It's eternal in the heavens. We have a temple, says Paul, in which we will be permanently worshipping the Lamb of God.

who takes away the sin of the world. And that's what John is seeing. John is seeing the fulfilment of the promise. He is seeing this multitude.

And what he sees, verse 15, they are before the throne of God. They serve him day and night, not in his tabernacle, but in his temple. It's permanent.

He who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall not hunger any more. They're no longer in the wilderness. They will not thirst anymore. They don't need water from the rock.

The sun shall not strike them in this wilderness, nor any scorching heat. They're no longer in the wilderness. The Lamb is in the midst of the throne. He will be their shepherd. He will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

[26 : 32] tears. And don't you find it amazing that they actually enter glory with tears in their eyes. Tears from the wilderness.

How the psalmist describes it in Psalm 84, it's through Beka's veil. We have to pass through the valley of tears in order to get to Zion.

That's what the psalmist says in Psalm 84. And it's there that God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Time has gone, but we'll pick this up again next week.

We'll continue the flow. But I just want to conclude by saying that what the Apostle John sees in his revelation, and going through it, every time I come to these verses, especially verses 15 to 17 of this chapter, it always reminds me of what another John saw in his dream.

We're seeing what the Apostle John saw in his revelation, but it always reminds me of what the other John saw in his dream, what John Bunyan saw in his Pilgrim's Progress.

[27 : 42] Christian and Hopeful, they're crossing the final river, and they meet these two shining ones on the other side. And the shining ones, they say to Christian and they say to Hopeful, they say to them, this is Mount Zion, this is the heavenly Jerusalem.

And they describe to them what it's going to be like before they even enter it. They say, there you shall walk and talk with the king throughout the endless ages of eternity. There you shall never again see sorrow, sickness, affliction, and death, for the former things have passed away.

There you will receive the comforts of all your toil, and of joy for all your sorrow. There you will wear crowns of gold, and enjoy the perpetual sight and vision of the Holy One.

There you shall see him as he is. There you shall continually worship him with praise and thanksgiving. There you shall enjoy your family and friends again who have gone there before you.

There you shall be clothed with glory and majesty, and so you will be with the Lord forever. Then Bunyan writes, right at the end, as the gates opened to let Christian and hopeful into the celestial city, I looked in after them, and behold the city shone like the sun, the streets were paved with gold, and on them walked many men, with crowns on their heads, palm branches in their hands, and golden harps to sing praises with.

[29 : 18] After that they closed the gates, then Bunyan writes, I wished that I myself was among them. I wished that I myself was among them.

And you know my friend, that is the whole point of the book of Revelation. Set your affection on things above. Stop looking downward or inward, but keep looking upward.

upward. Keep looking upward. May the Lord bless these thoughts to us. Let us pray. O Lord, our gracious God, we give thanks to Thee for Thy Word.

We give thanks, Lord, that Thy Word gives to us so many great and so many precious promises. Promises that remind us and reassure us that Thou art a covenant-making and a covenant-keeping God.

A God who made promises to Abraham long ago, and a God who has continued to keep those promises, despite the many failures of Thy people, despite our waywardness and our desire to go our own way, and yet Thou art the God who is faithful to Thy church, that Jesus Christ continues to build His church.

[30 : 40] The gates of hell will not prevail against it. And we thank Thee, O Lord, for that great vision that John saw, a multitude that no one could number, and yet Thou art the God who has numbered them, and named them each and every one.

And we pray, Lord, that we would be in that number as the saints go marching in. O Lord, we pray that Thou would bless us, help us to keep looking upward, to keep setting our affection on things above, where Christ is seated, and to know that He is sovereign, He is in control, He is superior and supreme above all things.

And Lord, our prayer is that He would have all the glory, that Thou wouldst bless us then as Thy people. Watch over us, we ask, help us, we pray, to be faithful and to be fervent, ever looking to Jesus, the author and the finisher of our faith.

Cleanse us, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, we're going to bring our time to a conclusion this evening. We're going to sing the words of Psalm 16.

Psalm 16. Sing Psalm's version. It's on page 17. Psalm 16.

[32 : 02] We're singing from verse 8 down to the end of the psalm. Psalm 16, as you know, it's the psalm of the empty tomb. It's the psalm that reminds us of the resurrection of Jesus.

And also, ultimately, our resurrection and the hope of glory. Before me constantly I set the Lord alone. Because he is at my right hand, I'll not be overthrown.

Therefore my heart is glad. My tongue with joy will sing. My body too will rest secure in hope unwavering. For you will not allow my soul and death to stay.

Nor will you leave your holy one to see the tombs decay. You have made known to me the path of life divine. Bliss shall I know at your right hand.

Joy from your face will shine. So these verses in conclusion of Psalm 16 to God's presence. Amen. Amen. praying.

[33 : 32] My mir controversies are the eyes of■■■ worldview therefore my heart is glad.

My tongue with joy will My body too will rest secure In hope and will again For you will not allow My soul in death to stay Nor will you be the Holy One To see the tools decay

You have made known to me The path of life divine Lest shall I know The hope at your right hand Joy from your face will shine The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ The love of God the Father And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit Be with you all, now and forevermore. Amen.