

# The real church

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's turn now to that passage that we read in the book of Revelation chapter 7, and especially verses 13 and 14. 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.

Now, as I mentioned earlier, we're going to have the sacrament of baptism at the end of this service. And baptism is a sign of entry into the Christian church.

It is the sign of entry, but it is, remember, only a sign. It is not the actual entry itself.

It symbolizes a person becoming a Christian. But as our text here explains, that is not how someone becomes a Christian.

[ 1 : 19 ] Simply by being baptized does not make anyone a Christian. Water doesn't make someone a Christian. But what I want to think about with you for a few minutes this morning is the truth spoken of in the whole of this passage concerning the church.

So this passage is speaking about the Christian church. What exactly is the Christian church? Is the church merely a human institution?

Is it simply the church as we see it in the world, the various branches and forms and denominations of the church? Is it simply the number of people who gather together on a Sunday morning to worship God?

Is that the church? Is it the people who go to church as we say? Well, we have to make a distinction in light of what the Bible says between what theologians call the visible and the invisible church.

Because in a sense what we have here this morning is the visible church. And I don't mean the building. I mean the people. You here this morning. You make up the visible church.

[ 2 : 45 ] And especially those of you who openly profess faith in Jesus Christ. And your family. You make up the visible church.

But the visible church is not identical with what we call the invisible church. For the invisible church is, we may say, the true church of God known to God.

Of course, there is an overlap between the two. But only God knows those who are truly his.

It's very possible for us to be hypocritical. For us to put on a pretense that we are Christian. Even to imagine that we are Christian.

When we haven't really surrendered our lives to Jesus Christ. And equally it's possible that there may be people, for one reason or another, because of special circumstances, who are not able to be part of the visible church.

[ 3 : 54 ] But nonetheless, God knows them as his. They have trusted in him. So what we see here is we're given a glimpse behind the curtain, as it were.

There's a veil or curtain that hides ultimate reality from us. We only see the outward appearance.

Man looks on the outward appearance. God looks on the heart.

But here we're allowed a glimpse within the veil. The church as it is seen by God. The real church of Jesus Christ.

Here the Apostle John has allowed this vision, this glimpse, of how God sees the church. And I want to look at this with you, especially in light of the words which the elder put to John, who are they and where did they come from?

Here we have a very interesting use of questions. It wasn't that the elder didn't know the answer to these questions. But he was getting John to think about something by asking him the question.

[ 5 : 07 ] So that then he could give an answer to that question himself. That's something that's a very useful method.

Not only should we be ready to answer the questions of others concerning what the Christian faith is, but we should always be prepared to ask questions. Here's a good example for parents bringing up children.

Not only should we be ready to answer their questions, but we should be always ready to be asking them questions to inspire them to think about God's word, about what the meaning of life is, about what God wants us to do.

So then, this question that was asked of John, who are they and where did they come from? Well, let's look at that question and let's try to provide the answer from the passage itself, from God's own word.

First, the elder here is talking about something that John has seen. He's speaking about this vision that was granted to John.

[ 6 : 20 ] As I've suggested, the veil being taken aside and John being allowed a glimpse of the church as God's leader.

Now from this vision itself, we can learn something before we go on to the explanation that the elder himself gave of the vision. The vision that John saw was of a great multitude that no one could count.

In verse 9. A great multitude. The thing that impressed him, the first thing that impressed him as this vision hit him, was the extent of the church of Jesus Christ.

A great multitude that no one could count. Now sometimes, you may be struck by the smallness of the invisible, sorry, the smallness of the visible church.

The smallness of the church as you see it Sunday by Sunday. You know that there are people meeting here to worship God. And you know that in other churches in the city, there'll be people meeting to worship God.

[ 7 : 34 ] But how small the numbers are in comparison to the thousands, the hundreds of thousands of people around us. And in this country, the church may seem a very small thing in terms of the numbers of people.

It may be something somewhere between 10 and 15 percent of people who go regularly to church. It's a small percentage of the whole population. And we think in terms of the whole population of the world at the present time. Because some of the most un-evangelized areas of the world are some of the most populous areas, like China and like India.

There are vast multitudes of people who as yet do not know the gospel, who as yet have not responded to it. And although in many parts of the world, the church may seem to be flourishing and growing, yet it still seems a small thing in comparison to the vast multitude of the world population.

Has that ever struck you? Well, if it has, and if you felt depressed or discouraged because of that thought, you need to have a glimpse behind the veil.

[ 9 : 02 ] You need to have this curtain pulled aside, even as it was pulled aside for John, and be allowed a glimpse of the invisible church, the church seen by God.

For God sees the whole church of Jesus Christ throughout all ages, and from all nations, and all backgrounds. And it is not a small thing.

We are told it is a great multitude that no one could count. It will be made up of all the people of God from all ages. It will be made up of people, perhaps, that others never thought of as being Christians.

It will be made up of people that are yet to become Christian in the future. And we believe on the basis of God's word that there is yet great blessing to come to the world.

There's going to be a great multitude that no one can count. And this is the fulfillment of what was promised way back to Abraham, right back in the book of Genesis.

[ 10 : 09 ] There it was promised to him that his seed, his descendants, would become like the sand on the seashore for number, like the stars in the sky that no one can number.

This is it fulfilled. In the church of Jesus Christ, the church as God sees it, the church as it will finally and ultimately be, when all of God's people are redeemed.

Notice too something that struck John about this church. He noticed the composition of the church in the vision. There was a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people, and language.

Again, perhaps it may sometimes strike people that the church seems to be very limited. I know quite often in our own day people say things like the church is very middle class. It's only drawn from a small section of society. Sometimes people may think that the church is only for that type of person.

[ 11 : 28 ] where we need to have a vision of the church as it really is. Not the church as it may be represented at any one time or place. But the church of Jesus Christ as it exists in the mind of God, as it exists in the vision of God, as it will one day be a reality before the throne of God in heaven.

The church of Jesus Christ is not limited or small in any such cultural way. But in the church of Jesus Christ there are people from every nation, tribe, people, and language. There are so many divisions in the world at the present time. Divisions between people because of nationality or political views. Divisions because of the color of skin.

But in the church of Jesus Christ there are no such divisions. That is the ultimate reality in the presence of God. But all will belong to Jesus Christ and all will worship him.

There there will be black and white, there will be rich and poor, there will be people speaking different languages, there will be people of different classes. And they will all equally be standing before the presence of God.

[ 12 : 56 ] We need to recapture that vision so that we today can seek to make the church of Jesus Christ today in line with that great ideal reality.

There should be no divisions amongst people on any such basis. And we should recognize all who trust in Jesus Christ as brothers and sisters in it.

Irrespective of their color or their background or their culture or their language. Because God recognized them as his if they trust in Jesus Christ.

But then John also noticed something else about this great multitude. Not only was it a great multitude, not only was it multinational but also he noticed its position.

It was standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. Throne is the throne that has been described in Revelation chapter 4. The throne of God.

[ 14 : 13 ] The center from which the whole universe is governed. And in the midst of that throne we are told there's a Lamb. The Lamb of course is that name given to the Lord Jesus.

Remember what John the Baptist said on that day when he was walking with his disciples and he saw Jesus he pointed to Jesus and he said behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

There is absolutely no doubt in scripture as to who the Lamb of God is it is Jesus. And in the very middle in the center of this throne from which the universe is governed there is a Lamb the Lord Jesus Christ.

You'll see in a moment why he's called the Lamb. But there Jesus is. There Jesus the eternal Son of God. There Jesus the one who took flesh and lived amongst us as a man.

There Jesus the one who died and the one who rose again. There Jesus is. And the church of Jesus Christ is gathered before that throne.

[ 15 : 21 ] What a tremendous privilege the church of Jesus Christ has. God governs his universe in different ways.

You know that he governs the universe through the physical laws that he has established in the universe. He sustains the universe by his power. He sustains it and holds it in being.

And scientists and others try to puzzle out these laws and the way in which God really has done things and is doing things and our minds aren't big enough to take it all in.

We can't seem to reach to the very heart of things. But what a privilege the child of God has. What a privilege the church of Jesus Christ has.

We are there before the throne. That is our position in the view of God. Yes, we may look at ourselves sometimes as the church and we may see the church oh so pitifully divided and weakened in this world.

[ 16 : 28 ] All the outward forms all the denominations and all these things we may see the church to seem so foolish and so powerless and so weak and we ourselves as individuals may feel so far from God.

But the church of Jesus Christ in reality is not far from God. Every person who is a child of God is gathered there with this vast multitude that no one can number before the throne of God and of the Lamb.

We have access into the presence of God through Jesus Christ. Our life is hid with Christ in God. We are seated in the heavenly realms with Christ Jesus. These are the things the New Testament says about the church of Christ made up of true believers in Jesus Christ.

Notice too the clothing of this vast multitude. John noticed it. It struck him and he said they were wearing white robes. There was something about the purity the dazzling nature of the clothes that they were wearing that drew his attention.

[ 17 : 49 ] How often in this world the church may seem to be very impure. The Christian may feel himself to be very impure.

He may feel as he walks through life his clothes are all splattered by mud and filth. He may feel so unworthy to be called a child of God.

And the world may look at the church and it may see all its inconsistency. It may see all its faults and failures. And these faults and failures are real.

And they're to be dealt with and repented of. But see how the church of God is viewed in the eyes of God. See how the church of God made up of true believers in Jesus Christ exists before the throne of God.

It is made up of people of every nation a vast multitude. They're gathered there before the throne and they're clothed in pure white. As God looks at the church of Jesus Christ he doesn't see all the splattering of mud and filth.

[ 19 : 07 ] He sees only a pure white mess. Then what a tremendous privilege the church of Jesus Christ has as we stand there in the very presence of God.

Not in our filth and in our sins but considered pure and righteous by God. John also noticed that this vast multitude was engaged in an activity that again we may look at the church and the world may look at the church and we might look at ourselves and we may say oh how inactive the church seems to be.

We just sit here and we don't do anything. There's a world out there perishing and we're not doing anything. And sometimes that lack of activity comes home to us in a powerful way and it may depress us and it may make us feel well we can't do anything.

well that inactivity is culpable. It is wrong. We need to get to grips with what God's words say about the role of the church but look at what God says about the church here.

Look at the vision that God has of the church that he granted to John. The church was there gathered before the throne they were wearing white robes and they 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.

[ 20 : 55 ] The picture here reminded John of something. He had seen something like this before. He had seen it not in the courts of heaven but he had seen it upon the dusty roads of Palestine.

He had seen the Lord Jesus riding on a donkey and he had seen men and women and boys and girls waving palm branches and saying Hosanna to God in the highest.

He had seen people recognizing something of the majesty of Jesus Christ and here he sees the church of Jesus Christ engaged in an activity an activity perhaps that the world would not recognize as an activity.

The praise of God. They are before the throne of God and they are praising God and they are praising the Lamb. They are praising God for his grace to them in Jesus Christ and they want the whole universe to know that Jesus is Savior.

Now the church is engaged to be active in all sorts of ways but the church has as its greatest activity the praise and glory of God.

[ 22 : 23 ] As Christians we are called to bring glory to the name of Jesus Christ. we are called not to bring glory to ourselves or that particular branch of the church to which we belong but to Jesus.

We are to praise him as we worship him. How often do we think as we sing praise to God that we are part of this great multitude that no man can number?

How often do we think that this is part of our great activity that before all the watching world before all the universe of seen and unseen beings we are shouting the praise of God?

How often do you think that when you get an opportunity as you speak to people in quietness ones and twos here and there as you get an opportunity to speak about Jesus Christ that you are engaged in this great activity the greatest of all activities of glorifying Jesus Christ.

that is the vision that God gave to John of the church of Jesus Christ. But the elder had a question this great multitude this great multitude made up of all nations gathered before the throne clothed in white and praising God who are they and where have they come from?

[ 23 : 49 ] And this is a question he wanted John to ponder and to think over. For there the church and the vision granted to John is the church as it is ideally.

The church as it exists in the mind of God the church as it will be one day at the end of time. But the church has not always been so.

The church is made up of individuals the church is made up of people like you and I who have come from somewhere as well as people who are going somewhere.

Who are these people and where did they come from? Well the elder answers his own question he says these are they who have come out of the great tribulation.

Now I know that the term the great tribulation has been used in a particular and specific sense by some Christians concerning the great trouble and trial that will come to the church of Christ before the end of the world.

[ 24 : 58 ] And I think there's good basis in scripture for saying that there will be such a time. But I don't believe it is used here in that sense.

Because here we are having described to us the church of Christ as such. Not any particular group of the church not any particular part living at a particular time it is the church of Christ.

And concerning the whole of the church of Christ this great multitude that no man can number they are coming out of great tribulation. Actually literally that's what the words say.

They are coming out of the tribulation the great one. In other words here the elder is giving John a glimpse of the fact that these people have not always been as they see now.

These are people coming out of great tribulation. They have great trouble and trials and tribulation in their background out of which they are coming and out of which finally they will come.

[ 26 : 07 ] Now of course here we are being reminded of the fact that those who become Christians those who are part of the church of Jesus Christ they have come out of the same background as everybody else with all the troubles and difficulties all the stress and distress that we have in this world.

The Christian is not a sort of special super being that he hasn't experienced all these ordinary things that everybody experiences. That is all the trouble and all the pains and all the tears of life in the flesh.

The Christian knows that he has a bad experience. But even more than that he has greater tribulations and trials that the world does not know anything about because Jesus never promised that it would be easy to become a Christian and to live as a Christian in this world.

To become a Christian Christian means that you are taking upon yourself a new burden and your responsibility to live for Christ in this world. And yes Christ will give you strength but he said that we have to take up our cross to follow him.

We have got to deny ourselves. Take up the cross. The cross the symbol of shame and of pain we have to take it up. that's what he promised us in life.

[ 27 : 33 ] And the apostle Paul spoke of these things. He spoke of how service for Jesus Christ meant troubles and persecutions and opposition. And the Christian knows these things.

Even sometimes knowing these things from people close to him, in his own family, his friends, his workmates. Things that move him to tears.

Things that hurt him. Things that distress him. The Christian knows all these experiences. Yet the elder says God is taking them out of this tribulation.

Those who are gathered before the throne are coming out of this tribulation. They have left that behind. And they are coming in to the nearer presence of God.

But then there's something else in his answer. that tells us about where these people have come from and who they are. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

[ 28 : 42 ] Not only are they coming out of great tribulation, but they are cleansed by the blood of the Lamb. Now that tells us something also about where they've been, where they're coming from.

God, it tells us that they have not always been pure and spotless. We saw them clothed in white in the presence of God, but they have not always been that way.

They have been just the same as everybody else. They are people who are sinners and rebels against God. They are those who are splattered by all the filth of their own sin and living in a sinful environment, a world that is in rebellion against God and does not care for the ways of God. We were all children of disobedience, all children of wrath. Remember that you were once alienated from God, the apostle Paul said.

Remember that once you too were without hope and without God in the world. He speaks to the church in Corinth and he says to them, none of these people, people guilty of all these sins, not only including sins of sexual deviance but also sins of financial swindling and all the kind of corruption that goes on in the world.

[ 30 : 12 ] He says, no one who remains in that condition inherits the kingdom of God and he says, that is what you once were. you were once like that.

But not anymore. You were washed. You were cleansed. You were justified. You were sanctified by Jesus Christ.

In other words, that is what these people have come from. There's been nothing in themselves that made God select them and say, oh, that person is better than the next one, so I'll have him.

No, God in Jesus Christ loved us and looked upon us in mercy and took us from such a background and washed us and clothed us in righteousness.

That salvation that we read of here in such wonderful terms comes to us not because of our own work, it comes to us only by the blood of Jesus Christ. Now, there's an expression that seems so old fashioned to many people today.

[ 31 : 26 ] It's an expression that is not heard in many churches, the blood of Jesus Christ. It seems to uncouth, people, but it is at the very heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ and there is no salvation apart from it.

What does it speak of? It speaks of a lamb. The lamb, John said, who takes away the sin of the world. Right throughout the whole Bible you can trace it.

It's a primary thread in the revelation of God that God appointed a way by which sinners could be forgiven. That he taught the people, generation after generation, that it was a way connected with sacrifice.

They had to bring a lamb and that lamb had to be slaughtered and its blood poured out. Later on in the symbolism of the temple and the tabernacle, that blood had to be sprinkled on a certain place, the place of atonement, the place where sins were paid for, where sins were covered, where sins were wiped out.

That was the only way by which sin could be forgiven. And year after year, century after century, God taught the people these things. Until one day John the Baptist stood there by the Jordan and he pointed to a man and he said, there is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

[ 32 : 52 ] All those years and centuries, they were waiting for the real Lamb of God. And now he had come. and the Lord Jesus Christ shed his blood.

The Lord Jesus Christ poured out his life to death on the cross in the place of sinners, taking upon himself the sins of the world, taking what was due to us, all our filthiness.

He took the penalty and he provided instead his perfect robe of righteousness, spotless and pure for all who would trust in him.

That's why it says they had washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. And that is the same Lamb who is now described here in the book of Revelation as the Lamb in the center of the throne, standing as it had been slain.

the Lord Jesus Christ still bearing upon his body, in his hands and in his feet and in his side, the marks of slaughter, the marks of death that he had once died for sinners.

[ 34 : 08 ] Where is he? He's at the center of the throne, the throne from which God governs the universe. The Lamb is there. And that is why there's a great multitude gathered there.

not because they have earned their way there, not because they have bought or bribed their way there, like they had got places in this world perhaps. But they are there because Jesus Christ has bought the way there, because Jesus Christ has paid the entry price, because Jesus Christ has laid down his life for sinners.

But notice something essential it says here in this verse. they have washed their robe and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

There came a particular point in time when these people came to see that they needed washing. They came to see that they needed cleansing.

not an outward cleansing by water or even by the symbolism of baptism, important as that is, but they came to see they needed the internal washing that only the blood of Jesus Christ could provide.

[ 35 : 35 ] They needed to have their sins wiped away, cleansed away. they need to have their guilt washed away and that is only by that atoning death of Jesus Christ.

And they themselves washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. That's what it means. there is a great emphasis in God's word upon the sovereignty of God, upon God taking the initiative in salvation, of God designing and working out our salvation, but there is also this, make no mistake, there is the responsibility upon us to receive that salvation.

The blood of Christ is shed. The blood of Christ is available for sinners. the merit of his death is there presented as a gift offered to you today, but you have to receive it.

You have to say, yes, I need that merit of that death. Yes, I need the blood of Jesus Christ, and I accept it, and I ask God to cleanse me in that blood.

Well, finally, we just notice that there are certain results of that washing. What characterizes the people of God?

[ 37 : 00 ] We've noticed where they've come from. We've noticed who they are in the sense of what they have done with regard to Jesus Christ and his death. But we need to see who they are now in the sense of the privileges that they have, and the responsibilities they have as a result of that.

Immediately after verse 14, the first word in verse 15 is therefore. There are certain implications, there are certain results that flow from this great truth.

Just two words I want us to think about. They are committed and they are covered. They are committed. They are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple.

That is the church of Jesus Christ as it is seen in the mind of God. This vision that John was granted of the church. He sees the church not as inactive and poor and hopeless and defeated.

He sees it as serving God day and night in his temple. Only God knows the service that is offered to him in all its entirety.

[ 38 : 21 ] The world may misunderstand what the church tries to do. The world may not see the preaching of the love of Jesus Christ as a worthwhile activity at all.

Even within the visible church there may be all sorts of divisions and disagreements as to what are the important things to do and what is real service to God and what is he.

But God knows not only those worries but he knows what is real service to him. And the question we have to ask for ourselves are we really serving him?

Are we serving him as those who have experienced his land? Responding to his grace in Jesus Christ? Are we seeking to serve him day and night? For that service is acceptable.

Not just on earth but it's acceptable in the very presence of God before the throne of God. And then also we notice that they were covered.

[ 39 : 25 ] In the end of verse 15 we read and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Now that's a marvelous expression and it's too much to try to deal with in a minute or two.

But it's saying that God will dwell with us. God will tabernacle with us. God will pitch his tent with us. He'll live with us. But it says he'll put his tent over us.

So that his living with us is a protection of us. And then we read the whole way in which that is spelt out.

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.

These words are almost beyond need to explain and really they are beyond our ability to explain.

[ 40 : 36 ] The Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd. The one who is the Lamb of God is also the shepherd. The good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

It's as if human language is not big enough, not good enough, not full enough to express the full extent of who Jesus Christ is and what he's done.

Every metaphor has to be used. Every kind of figure of speech has got to be used and even mixed together here so that the Lamb is also the shepherd to express the glory of who Jesus is, what he has done and what he is doing for us.

He's our shepherd. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall note one. In other words he says that the church as it truly is, the church as one day it will be in reality in the new universe, there will be no unfulfilled need, there will be no inconsolable longing.

We know what it is here and now to hunger and to thirst, not only physically, but we know it mentally and spiritually, to long that we were better people than what we are.

[ 41 : 53 ] we long that the world would not be so ravaged by sin. We would long that we are not so tormented by Satan and by temptation.

We long for all kinds of good and proper things if we are children of God. And we feel needs and pain and we weep real tears.

that the time is coming that John discovered in this vision and in this explanation. The time is coming when these needs will all be fulfilled and when these longings will all be satisfied and God himself will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

This then is the real church as God sees it now. And as it will be one day in the glory of the new universe. Are you part of that?

You can only become part of it. Not by belonging to an outward institution although that's important. Not just by having baptism. Not just by having any outward thing.

[ 43 : 05 ] Not just by having Christian parents. Not just by attending church. All these things good. But they don't enter you into this church of Jesus Christ.

It is only the blood of the Lamb of God that does that. And it is only by coming simply to him. Asking him to receive you. To forgive you. To cleanse you.

To renew you. That you have entry into the church of God. And today now at this moment you are being genuinely invited so to come to him.

And so to know the glory of which this passage speaks. Let us pray. Our gracious and loving heavenly father we confess our own weakness and foolishness our inability to comprehend all these glorious things that your word lays before our minds.

But we pray that here today at this very moment we would grasp those things that are essential. We pray that your Holy Spirit would reveal these things to us forcibly.

[ 44 : 17 ] That they may come home to us as the most real things. And that the things of time and of sense would take a lesser importance as we see the glory of eternity.

And may we today glorify Jesus Christ and praise him above all for what he has done for sinners.

We pray that you would bless us in the rest of our service here together.

May the Lord Jesus Christ be uplifted and glorified in all that we do. We ask it in his name. Amen.