

SERMON November 3 2024 “A Glimpse of the Big Picture”

Dear fellow redeemed of the Lord, today we're given a glimpse into God's plans for us.

And what a view it is! **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 . . .**

This is among my favorite biblical passages. As I reflected on those words, I tried to imagine who John saw in that crowd.

John was old and in exile when he had this vision, so I imagined that among the people he saw in this vision were his friends; his fellow apostles, some of whom had been gruesomely martyred. He'd have seen Steven, the first Christian martyr, and Paul.

How comforting this vision must have been to John to see his friends now safe. To see their suffering turned into joy.

Seeing Jesus, the Lamb, upon His throne, with His own gathered around Him is a tremendous blessing, for it means that all of God's promises are fulfilled.

But there were plenty of not-so-famous people in that crowd, too. A woman whose mind was taken by Alzheimer's.

A baby who died before she was able to be born.

A young child who was overcome by cancer.

A young woman gunned down by a mentally ill person.

A family killed by a drunk driver.

A father who always struggled to make ends meet.

A college student drank too much one night and fell out of an 11th-story window.

A man who lived under a bridge.

A soldier whose legs were blown up by an IED.

A pastor whose body wore out.

Yes, there's an amazing number of folks in heaven this All Saints Day, who would you see in that great multitude? Parents, siblings, and long-lost friends.

These, the angel tells John, **are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. *Tribulation***, not ease.

Life in this world is seldom easy. There is hunger, thirst, and tears. There are troubles, trials, and temptations.

There is weakness, fear, and death.

God's little flock is hunted by the devil, hounded by his demons, and harassed by evil, both without and within.

And, Lord knows, we often fail. We are often overcome. As we look at our lives in this world, we don't see blessed. We see trouble, difficulty, and sin.

And yet, for us who live amid a fallen world, there is hope. Today, we're given a glimpse of a brighter future. We're told there is more to reality than what our eyes can see.

As John said today in his epistle, though **we are God's children now, what we will be has not yet appeared.**

Who we are and what we will be is hidden now in this world, but the day is coming when all will be revealed.

When Jesus comes again, John's vision becomes a reality. On that day, all of God's promises will be fulfilled.

Those whom Jesus calls blessed don't often look blessed on earth. In fact, they may look exactly the opposite.

Martyrdom and suffering don't look blessed.

Those who mourn don't seem blessed.

Those who are poor in spirit and hunger and thirst for righteousness don't appear to be blessed.

Those who are merciful are often taken advantage of. The peacemakers, too.

The pure in heart are mocked, and those who dare to speak of righteousness different than the world's understanding can expect persecution.

Lost jobs, friends, and reputations all happened to Jesus. And it will happen to those who are His. For a servant is not above their Master.

And yet, over and over, our Lord says we are **blessed**. And the angel in John's vision confirms they are blessed!

That sounds ridiculous to many. They say, "***That's not blessed! At least, not the sort of blessing I want!***"

Blessed is to win ten million dollars in the lottery.

Blessed is to have all you want. Blessed is to not suffer.

Blessed is to be full and satisfied. Blessed are they whose enemies are crushed. Blessed is having an easy life, being well-liked, and ***having all your dreams come true***.

That last one may be the key.

Are your dreams only rooted in this world and life? Are they that small? . . . Maybe it's time to think bigger.

Maybe it's time to realize we don't know what blessed is. Jesus tells us today that the truly blessed do not seem blessed for a short time we call life.

Blessed are the ones John saw. The ones who endured tribulation, but now are blessed forever.

Hebrews chapter 11 is sometimes called the Great Faith chapter. It speaks of a great multitude of Old Testament saints who were waiting for God's promise of a Savior.

John saw them, too, in His vision. Abel, Enoch, and Noah; Abraham and Sarah; Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph; Rahab, the prostitute; Gideon, Samson, David, and the prophets.

And John saw many who aren't named: those who were tortured, who suffered mocking, flogging, chains and imprisonment. Those who were stoned, sawn in two, and killed with the sword. **And we wonder: *how could they stand firm in their faith in the face of death?***

The answer is that, ***by faith, they dreamed bigger.*** They knew they **were strangers and exiles on earth, seeking a homeland, a better country, a heavenly one—the one God had prepared for them.**

And as John's vision shows us today, their dreams - I mean, their faith - came true.

And so All Saints Day reminds us that the purpose of the church, the purpose of our faith, is **not that we live a blessed life, but that we die a blessed death**, which is far better.

A blessed death. That phrase sounds strange. For death is the result of sin. Death is alien to who God created us to be. And death never looks blessed. It's ugly and empty, even when it ends long-term suffering and pain.

If suffering and pain end in this life only to continue in the next, that is not a blessed death, but a pitiable one.

A blessed death, though, is possible. John's vision and the saints who have gone before us testify to that.

It is one of the elders standing around the throne in heaven who tells us how. **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.**

It is the blood of the Lamb, the blood of Jesus, that enables us to die a blessed death.

Ironically, it is the blood of the Lamb, that puts a satanic bulls-eye on your back. His constant harassment is what makes this life seem, at times, anything but blessed.

But ***blessed*** are you, Jesus says. Over and over, He says it! Even if you don't look like it. Even if you don't feel like it.

But it's true, for Jesus took your curse for you.

He died the cursed death your sins had merited and then rose triumphant from the grave so that you could die a blessed death and rise to a blessed life with Him.

For to be **washed in the blood of the Lamb** means to be washed by the blood that flowed out from Him on the cursed cross. The blood of forgiveness. The blood that contains His life.

And you have been so washed and continue to be washed as that blood washes over you with His absolution and in the words of His Gospel.

And He gives you His life as you eat His Body and drink His Blood. And so, you are blessed. Here and now and for forever.

You lead a blessed life, and you will die a blessed death. For you are in Christ, so that all that's His is yours. Even if it is hidden under suffering, tribulation, and death in this world and life now.

But that doesn't our blessed status unreal. For hidden doesn't mean not real - in fact, just the opposite. Hidden means it is here and real; you just can't see it. But John saw it.

And we believe it. I mean, see *it* . . . by faith.

So today, All Saints Day, the saints are encouraging us. To not give up. To keep the faith. Remember that you can never be alone at church. For where Jesus is, His saints are.

Here in this church, we are about to join the saints around the throne of the Lamb. They're here, just hidden.

You know, some Christians like to tell us stories of the good old days when churches were filled, Sunday School classes booming, and confirmation classes large.

Yet John's vision shows us that these are the good old days.

All Saints Day teaches us that what we call death on earth is called the final deliverance in heaven.

That blessed is what God calls blessed, not what we think blessed is.

And that the day is coming when all that is now hidden will be revealed. We will see Jesus, who, by the way, did not look very blessed either.

Born with animals and laid in their feed trough.

Forced to flee a king who wanted to kill Him.

Growing up in poverty.

Opposed every step of the way.

Arrested as a criminal.

Mocked, beaten, whipped, crucified.

But Jesus was blessed, and he came to win blessings for us. His blessings were hidden at the time, and so are yours, for Christ is in you.

And ***when He appears***, John says, ***we will be like Him***.

That is, we will see what has been hidden all along. **AMEN**

As John saw, and said: in heaven there will be no more hunger, no more thirst, no more tears, no more scorching heat of tribulations—only blessedness and joy.

Yes, **this is the Feast of Victory for our God!** His victory for all the saints. For you and me. *Alleluia!*

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.