

Victory
November 15th, 2014

Revelation 7:9-17
Saints Triumphant A

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Victory. That is the message I have for you today. Victory. We are in the season of End Times and today we celebrate particularly the Saints Triumphant. That is the picture we're given on the last day, after the judgment has taken place, those who are gathered to God will celebrate their victory, their triumph. The saints triumphant.

That is us. We are the victors.

And although it's a nice picture to look forward to and something that we can long for, I'm also here to tell you that the victory is already ours. We are now the saints triumphant, it's not something we will become sometime down the road.

Doesn't necessarily feel that way though, does it? In fact, neither part of it feels true. We don't feel like saints and we don't feel triumphant. And all the sin that permeates this world, all the influences of the devil and our own sinful natures are doing everything they can to keep that impression going in us. That we are not the saints triumphant. No, we're the miserable losers.

And really, what do we have to feel triumphant about? How are we, Christ's church, triumphant? The attitude of our country and even the world at large is turning more and more anti-Christian. For striving to help others, to rescue them from eternal death, we are called close-minded, hate-filled and bigoted. We aren't the church triumphant, we're the church persecuted, the church beaten-down.

Of course this shouldn't be a surprise. God not only promised we would be persecuted, he told us why. The sinful heart hates God. The sinful heart wants to be its own god, that's the very attitude that led to Adam and Eve taking the fruit of the forbidden tree in the first place. And if the sinful heart wants to be god, there's no room there for a real God that demands the honor and glory for himself.

So if the world at large, full of sin, hates God, it will hate everything to do with him. Including his people, his church. It will beat us down, it will attack us and we will suffer for it here. Very rarely do we see any kind of comeuppance, very rarely do we see what we would call justice on those who persecute God's people. Rather they seem to live lives of comfort while the people of God are pushed under. The sin of the world seems to be winning.

And that's to say nothing of ourselves. Nevermind feeling triumphant, we don't even seem to belong in the category of "saint" anyway! Sometimes all the sin in the world only serves to remind us of our own. We may want to get mad at it for a while, to shake our fist in a how dare they kind of way, but when that wears out and we lose our indignation maybe we realize that we're no better. Maybe we don't persecute the church of God but we certainly don't do what we ought to for him.

He tells us to trust that he is ruling this world in the best way possible so that people can be saved. But we look at the course the world takes and shake our heads like he's making mistakes. We put our own wisdom on level with his, thinking that if I were in charge things would be a whole lot better. But there we go, putting ourselves in God's place, no better than the ones who try to do it openly. And when trouble and difficulty come rather than the patient endurance that God calls for, we cry and moan until someone makes it better or at least agrees with us how terrible we have it. We become the center of attention for ourselves and forget the God that cares for us.

Every day it's something new, every day we let ourselves and our God down in some different way. Or even worse, the same way we did yesterday, even though we swore never to do it again. Every day new sin is piled on the old and the repeated sin or the repeated refrain of failure again and again seeks to drag us down and ruin us. How can we claim the title of "saint", which literally means "holy one"? That's not me. I'm not holy. I'm the exact opposite. I'm a bundle of evil and corruption wrapped up in a pleasant façade that seems to fool every one else, but I know, not God.

We know in our hearts what sin deserves. We feel the guilt, we know there must be a payment made for our crimes. A punishment. And even before God tells us what that punishment will be, we fear the worst. But on our own could we even imagine how bad it truly is? The fair punishment for crimes against God is to be cut off from him. To lose out on his grace and mercy for eternity. And that means the eternal fire.

The world screams it at us, you are failures. Our own hearts tell us as much, you have failed. Nothing about us fits the mold.

And still I tell you, victory.

Because we are the saints triumphant.

You see, our God has *two* primary qualities. And so far we've been talking as though there were only one. That one is true about him, he is just. He must punish sin where it happens, he cannot just ignore it. But our God is also love.

And our God does not want to punish us. He does not want us to be defeated. He wants to rescue us, despite there being nothing about us that should make him want to. And so our God did the only thing he could that would satisfy both. He punished himself. He was born a man so he could be our substitute. And as a man he lived and as a man he died. Jesus the Christ rode out in battle to meet death and the devil head-on and by dying he won. On the cross.

There he triumphed over the schemes of the devil. He bought forgiveness and eternal life with God for everyone. He washed away the stain of sin. He removed the punishment. Victory was won.

And by the faith he has given each of us here, God makes that victory yours. And faith is nothing more than saying we trust God to do what he promised. Faith itself is freely given to us by our God. Through faith we are saved. When God changes our hearts and causes us to trust him, that is a victory. It should not be possible, we are born hostile to God, but he makes us trust him. He triumphs for us over the hate-filled heart we are born with.

And through faith by his death he makes us his saints. By faith you are covered by the holy blood of Christ. God sees you through that sacrifice, through his blood. And so he sees you as he himself has made you. Holy. Perfect. Without stain or flaw or blemish. A saint. Yes, we continue to sin. And each sin has already been paid for in blood. Yes we fail, but it's not about us! It's about Jesus. With eyes fixed on him two things happen as we strive to live like the saints we are. First, the failures become meaningless. We know that now we still struggle in sin. But with eyes on Jesus we don't dwell on our faults, we dwell on the forgiveness Christ bought us for each one of them. But because our eyes are on him this doesn't turn into a license to sin or a lazy attitude that doesn't care what we do one way or the other either. Because the second thing that happens with eyes on Christ is a heart full of his love that pours out into our thoughts and words and actions. Looking to him, filled with him and by his power we are able in some small way to be now the saints he has made us in God's eyes. And we do it simply because that is who we want to be. Not distressed by the failures but still striving more and more to always do better. We are the saints even now.

And we are triumphant. No, it's not complete yet, but we have the victory over sin, death and the devil right now. The world and the devil can howl and rage, torment us how they like but they cannot snatch us out of the hand of our Father who loves us. By faith Jesus gives us that victory now. It is ours. He has put his name on each of us, claimed us as his own and he protects what is his. The devil prowls to attack but in Christ we cannot be harmed. Again, eyes on him, he will protect us. When we look to him for peace and protection in the darkness of this world, he will foil every clumsy and irrational attack of the devil. The victory is his and in him, the victory is ours.

But you're right too, we don't have the fullness of it yet. Those blessed to go before us are celebrating the fullness of it now. And when the final day comes we will be gathered with our God in final unending triumph. It will be a victory complete and untainted by sin. This is the image we have to comfort ourselves with now, to encourage each other with while we wait for that great day to come. And so that is what I'd like to leave you with this morning. That great image of victory waiting for us. It is already ours, but we must wait to fully enjoy it. This is what we have in Christ, it is the promised end for our labor in Christ. It is a triumph over every force of evil. It is victory.

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

¹¹ 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, ¹² saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"

¹³ Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?"

¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. ¹⁷ 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."

Amen.