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Sermon preached by Mr.J.Delves at "Ebenezer", Clapham
on Lord's Day morning 6.4.52

Text: Revelation 7.13-14

"And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they? And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

The things that John saw and the voice that he heard, the song of the redeemed of the Lord, are beyond our grasp. Great mysteries are here involved that nature cannot understand and which even the people of God cannot fathom who yet have some gracious view and perception of the happiness and glory of those who have for ever left behind all sin and sorrow and tribulation and for whom the last enemy is destroyed. Neither have we need to try to picture in our minds what is here described but rather to pray that we may be, by God's grace, found among them. All the rest we can leave, for we know that their joy is great, that "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him". The words of our text are very descriptive of the happiness of the saints in heaven. That from which they suffered here is described as being no more pertaining to them. "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes". But all words can but faintly describe the beauty and glory of that worship they enjoy. Those who fear God, and are at moments favoured with a touch of His mercy, a token of His love, a little softening of heart in their tribulations, rest from their conflict, and communion with the Lord, can truly say "Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee". When that is really felt in the heart earth fades away and the things of it are like thick clay to the soul which longs to burst its bonds and enter into that felicity. Do you really feel, some of you, that you have something real that you could die with? Do you feel graciously confident that one day you will see Him as He is? Many people in a profession of religion are vainly confident and rest in a false security about their state. All such will have a rude awakening when the final summons shall come. Have you got a religion with this in your heart?

"'Tis a point I long to know,
(Oft it causes anxious thought),
Do I love the Lord, or no?
Am I His, or am I not?"

(283)

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Is there, not a passing thought, but a real concern about your state before God so as to be continually breathing forth that prayer, "Say unto my soul, I am thy salvation"?

This remarkable book and the whole of Scripture, right through, reveals the fact that God has a church and a people that are formed for His praise. "This people have I formed for myself; they shall show forth my praise". They have a standing. Have you and I any standing for eternity? Have we? "There is therefore no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit." (Romans 8.1) O what a standing! The gates of hell can never prevail against that favoured soul who can truthfully and feelingly, under divine teaching and gracious revelation, say "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God", and who, in their souls, have received a witness that He is a living Jesus for them. Did He not say, "Yet a little while, and the world seeth me no more; but ye see me; because I live, ye shall live also" (John 14.19)? What a standing! What a foundation! Jesus Christ is that foundation. "Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid which is Jesus Christ". Where any are on that foundation they can never be shaken off it. They may have many shakings and have many sharp and bitter temptations which involve many questionings; but after all the questionings and after all the unbelief that is often so painfully powerful, if your religion is real it will bring you to this, "Give me Christ or else I die"; and this is where the standing is; this is the ground of all hope and the prospect that every believer feels. The Lord's people have moments when they feel the strength of that foundation. It is no theory with them but a solid comfort in their soul. They are blessed in their standing and the ways of God with them in this wilderness world are all appointed. This great company that John saw here were those who came out of great tribulation, not those who had a bed of roses here in this mortal state, who had a heaven here and have a heaven to come. They were such as came out of great tribulation and who had washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb; not in the blood of bulls and of goats nor in their own blood. Even the godly martyrs who lay down their lives for Christ's sake were not redeemed by their own blood that was shed, although they had great and solemn fellowship with Christ therein, but they were redeemed by the blood of Christ, that Lamb of God who was without spot and without blemish. They washed their robes. They were by the power of His grace separated from an ungodly world, sanctified and given faith in the bleeding Lamb and by that faith received in their conscience the merit of His precious death and placed their whole weight upon Him, renouncing all beside. That was how they washed their robes; the washing of their robes does not designate creature perfection, but in the exercise of faith in the Lamb they washed their sins away as we sometimes sing,

"The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day;
And there have I, as vile as he,
Washed all my sins away." (160)

Guilt can only be removed by the virtue of Christ's blood and the application of it by faith, the receiving of that merit experimentally, feelingly, hearing the Lord's voice, saying, "I have blotted out, as a thick cloud thy transgressions and, as a cloud thy sins".

The chapter speaks of a certain number that were sealed and that certain judgments that were to come upon the earth were deferred until the complete number were sealed. So the voice of the angel was heard, "Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads." This sealing, to my mind, indicates three things. It indicates in the first place a divine foreknowledge of everyone. It is noticeable here that there are 144,000 actually specified, that is 12,000 of every tribe. This number may perhaps have reference, not only to the twelve tribes, but to the twelve jewels, which figure is used in the 21st. chapter in relation to the heavenly city which had twelve gates; but even 144,000 does not actually specify the number of the redeemed; because in the 9th. verse the apostle breaks forth like this, "I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds and people, and tongues" not just 12,000 out of each tribe but a mighty multitude. The number is only known to One and that is the One who has chosen them and sealed them with a seal of divine foreknowledge. So Paul writing to Timothy says, "Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are His" (2 Tim. 2.19) Everyone is registered, sealed, in their foreheads. They were visibly marked, they were marked as being of the chosen number who should be around the Throne of God in heaven. The point that concerns you and me is not how many there are or may be but whether God did look from all eternity upon such as we are and did there seal us in that immutable covenant that can never be broken. Did He bind us up in a bond of union with the Lamb, from condemnation free? And feeling this, has there ever been a sealing in your soul by the witness of the Holy Ghost there bringing the sacred assurance into your heart and conscience that He has chosen you?

"Though God's election is a truth,
Small comfort there I see,
Till I am told by God's own mouth,
That He has chosen me." (31)

This sealing indicates something else beside divine foreknowledge; it indicates divine sovereignty. It does not say that the whole number were sealed here but so many of each tribe. The Word of God is very solemn with regard to

this important point, divine sovereignty traces the line between the dead and the living and marks their destiny. "Jacob have I loved, Esau have I hated", and so we read that "Two women shall be grinding at a mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left". (Matt.24.41) God's sovereignty is a very solemn consideration because we all come inside it, none can escape. Divine sovereignty will have to do with everyone of us either in wrath or in mercy and what a solemn consideration it is. Here is a sealing of a certain number and we are either among them or we are not among them. How can that great and important question be settled? Only by the Lord Himself, and how many of us do really pray after this way?

"Assure my conscience of her part
In the Redeemer's blood;
And bear my witness with my heart,
That I am born of God." (24)

But there is something else beside divine sovereignty in this sealing, there is also a divine security. There is a standing, as I have hinted, that is beyond the reach of all the devils in hell. The gates of hell cannot prevail against this divine security. They are in Him and in Him for ever. They are secure there in the decrees of God and nothing can affect their standing or their destiny.

"Once in Him, in Him for ever" (766)

Everyone is safe there in His power. "The eternal God is thy refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms". Have you and I a hope of heaven upon good grounds and what we hope God has done for our souls? Here they are before the throne of God, there enjoying the pure holy worship; victory was theirs. Death is swallowed up in victory for them, they have palms in their hands, a token of victory through the blood of the Lamb and they know to whom to ascribe that victory, "Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb". Contemplate their enjoyment! We cannot begin to conceive their joy because here all is marred with sin;

"My best is stained and dyed with sin;
My all is nothing worth" (959)

and yet they are sweet moments when the Lamb of God is seen by faith and is worshipped. But O to contemplate that state where no sin can ever exist; an eternal state of absolute freedom from the very being of sin is wonderful. They "washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." John was asked about this and it would seem that when the enquiry was put to him he brought forth a further enquiry. "And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which arrayed in white robes? and whence came they?" - not because he did not know but he brought forth from John a request that he should inform him about these, "And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest."

How often in our things we are brought to that point. You may have to walk in something that is so dark and confounding and mysterious and afflicting that you cannot understand, but how often you may have to come before the Lord in it and say, "Lord, Thou knowest!" It is our mercy that the Lord never needs an explanation. This was one of the elders. This morning it struck me like this: the Lord's people often have to come before the Lord under heavy weights and burdens and things they could never explain, sometimes not to their best friends, and so "Lord, Thou knowest". You cannot take anything to the Lord in prayer that puzzles Him, or of which He would have to say, as we sometimes say, I cannot get to the root of it. It may be you have had many a prayer with just this in it, "Lord, Thou knowest" and you have not got any further; yet there has been something in that which has carried your trouble and laid it at His feet, and perhaps that was all you could say, "Lord, Thou knowest". They can be very sweet moments and sometimes a way of relief may have been brought into your heart by a voice from the Lord saying, Cast your care on Me. "Lord, Thou knowest", this care, this burden, this necessity, this big thing, this cross, this affliction, this vexing thing, this perplexing thing, "Lord, Thou knowest". Thou knowest how far this may be needful for me. Lord, Thou knowest how long I may have to walk in this, Thou knowest the purpose and the end of it. "These are they which came out of great tribulation". You have not come up out of your tribulation yet but they who have come out of their tribulation did once wrestle here with sins and doubts and fears and water their couch with tears. It is well with them, they have come out of great tribulation, Thou knowest, these are they, these are the ones. Who would have envied them in their tribulation, in their persecutions, in the cruelties that were inflicted upon them? How clearly the Scriptures show this tribulation. The difference between tribulation, I feel, and common troubles that more or less affect all mankind, is that tribulation appears more generally to refer to the sufferings of the redeemed of the Lord for Christ's sake and in this wilderness state is an appointment of tribulation. Every ingredient in the cup is divinely appointed and tribulation is sanctified to the soul when one can say,

"Thrice comfortable hope
That calms my stormy breast;
My Father's hand prepares the cup,
And what He wills is best." (70)

Those three words do wonders for you, "My Father's hand". O but it is a bitter thing, a hard thing, that I have to walk in, say you. Yes, but you see they came out of great tribulation, not some little tribulation that irritated them, but great tribulation; they came up out of it, they left it all behind for ever.

Every pain, every sorrow, every grief, every cross were left behind for ever, they came out of great tribulation. Look at the 11th. chapter of the Hebrews. Everyone in that list came out of great tribulation. Think of what they suffered. So in the New Testament we have the records in the Acts of the persecutions of the believers, and so it has been in the purposes of God more or less through the ages in the history of the church. Those trophies of His grace have been gathered in out of great tribulation; they had to walk in it, they did not try to escape it and so it can be seen with many of the godly martyrs; not accepting deliverance, they walked in their tribulations, they loved not their lives unto death, Christ was more to them than lengthened days and they came out of great tribulation. These are the people that are now before the throne; no more hunger or thirst, no more weeping, no more pain. What a mercy it will be if all we suffer, we suffer here, if death will be a deliverance from every grief, every sorrow. Thus it is to everyone of them that are sealed.

May the Lord give us grace to endure to the end, in mercy sanctify His dealings, and order all things well. Amen

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