

Text: Rev. 7:13-14

Title: "Who are these arrayed in white robes?"

Time: 8/13/2017 am

Place: NBBC

Intro: This past week the origins of the Purple Heart military medal were remembered, because as the oldest American military decoration, the Purple Heart was established by General George Washington on August 7, 1782. Today, the award is given to men who are wounded in battle in defense of our country.

When first established, the purple heart had the word "Merit" across it, and it was called, "The Badge of Military Merit." It was awarded to a broader category of enlisted man according to its original design. Washington's daily order explained:

"The General ever desirous to cherish virtuous ambition in his soldiers, as well as to foster and encourage every species of Military merit, directs that whenever any singularly meritorious action is performed, the author of it shall be permitted to wear on his facings over the left breast, the figure of a heart in purple cloth, or silk, edged with narrow lace or binding. Not only instances of unusual gallantry, but also of extraordinary fidelity and essential service in any way shall meet with a due reward."

We certainly recognize something noble about awarding examples of unusual gallantry, extraordinary fidelity, and essential service when it comes to those who fight to defend our country and her freedoms. It is good and proper that we should be able to recognize and honor this distinguished service above the norm.

I mention that truth this morning because it has a spiritual parallel, one that we find throughout Scripture, and one that I believe we find in Revelation 7.

We saw last week that one of the 24 elders asks and answers two very important questions about the innumerable multitude: "Who are these?" and "From where do they come?" He tells us that they are believers, washed in the blood of the Lamb, who are no longer in danger of experiencing the earthly horrors of the Great Tribulation. On this we futurists interpreters of Revelation are all agreed.

But as interpreters of the Book of Revelation, some other questions come to mind about who these believers are and from where they came. We would like to know their relationship to the rapture of the church. We would like to know how they came to be in heaven. We would like to know whether we will be among them or even with them. These are all good and important questions for a futurist/chronological reading of this prophetic book.

Futurists have come to two conclusions in this regard, both of which face some challenges.

(1) First, a number of interpreters believe that this innumerable multitude in heaven are people who have been saved on earth during the Great Tribulation. They are distinguishable from the 24 elders, who represent saints that were raptured at the end of the church age and never had to face the Great Tribulation. The thought is that during the Great Tribulation, multitudinous revivals will cause many to trust Christ as their Savior after the church is raptured.

There are essentially two complications with that understanding. The first is the problem that we have with how

these believers came to be in heaven if they missed the rapture of the church. Often the answer given is that they are martyrs, but that idea does not seem to be a good fit because these are experiencing the joys of their final reward as apparently resurrected or translated people. By way of contrast, the 5th seal described the martyrs of the Great Tribulation period as awaiting their final reward. We are told of their resurrection in chapter 20 at the end of the Tribulation period.

The more serious problem with seeing this innumerable multitude as the result of Great Tribulation revivals is that it is difficult to reconcile this idea with Paul's description of the Great Tribulation period in 2 Thess. 2:9-12. The truth of that passage seems to indicate that the time to get saved by repentance and faith in the gospel is now during the church age. God will send a strong delusion on those who refuse to be saved today that will cause them to believe the lie of the antichrist. It will be a time of God's judgment.

Some will be saved during the Tribulation, but most if not all of these will be Jews. Certainly, it is difficult to think of the Great Tribulation as a time when an innumerable multitude are saved given Paul's description here.

(2) The second understanding some futurists have about the identity of this innumerable multitude is that we see them in heaven because they have experienced the rapture of the church before the Great Tribulation. Unlike the 144,000 Jews who are on earth during this time and who need to be sealed to be protected from it, this multitude from every nation and tongue is safe in heaven before the Great Tribulation ever starts.

I believe that is the correct interpretation of this passage, but there are two difficulties with this conclusion that have to be faced as well.

First, the passage describes this multitude as having “come out of” the Great Tribulation (v. 14). How can we say that these believers were raptured prior to the Great Tribulation, when that phrase seems to indicate that they were first in it, and then came out of it. It turns out that this difficulty is not as hard to solve as it first appears. In the Greek language, *to come out of* something can mean *to come away from* it and miss it entirely. The same phraseology is used by the Lord Jesus, who said He did not ask to be saved *from* or *out of* His hour of testing (Jn. 12:27; see 13:1). *To come out of* or *be saved out of* something can simply mean *to come away from* it or *be saved away from* it. So it is possible that the point of the phrase in v. 14 is that these saints have escaped the judgments of the Great Tribulation, not that they were in them before coming out of them.

The second issue with seeing this innumerable multitude as raptured saints is a bit more difficult, but I think what we noticed about the Purple Heart military decoration can help. The question arises, “If these are raptured saints, in what way are they distinguishable from the 24 elders, whom we already said are raptured saints?”

As we answer that question with the rest of our time this morning, I want us to notice two things about the comparison between this innumerable multitude and those represented by the 24 elders.

I. The 24 elders and the multitude have some wonderful things in common.

- A. Both come from every ethnic background imaginable (7:9 – multitude; 5:9 – elders).
- B. Both are clothed in white raiment (7:13 – multitude; 4:4 – 24 elders).
- C. Both are clothed in white because they have been washed in the redeeming blood of the Lamb (7:14 – multitude; 5:9 – 24 elders).
- D. Both are safely worshipping in the throne room of God and of the Lamb as glorified saints (7:15-17 – multitude; 5:13 – every creature worships).

Ill: The Revolutionary War came to an end when General Cornwallis surrendered the British position at Yorktown, VA in 1781. Two years later the Treaty of Paris made it official – America had won her independence. That was a great day for every American, even the Loyalists who had refused to fight against the British king. Our town's historical society website notes that New Boston had the highest proportion of Loyalists of any town in New Hampshire. We like to talk more about the Molly Stark cannon today, with good reason. There is some shame in the Loyalist cause as we look back on the hard-fought victory and blessed results of the American Revolution.

Appl: Well, just like every American obtained the reward of independence and a new nation at the end of the Revolutionary War, every believer will be truly blessed when our battle down here is over. From every ethnic background, with white robes washed from sin by the blood of the loving Lamb, every believer will worship safely in the throne room of God and enjoy His blessed presence forever in a glorified state.

This innumerable multitude and the 24 elders have some wonderful things in common. Together they are the raptured saints who have escaped the judgment of the day of

the wrath of the Lamb. Do you have these things in common with them?

II. The 24 elders have some wonderful things that the multitude does not.

III: Although George Washington loved all of his fellow countrymen, and was willing to give his life for their defense and freedom, in his establishment of the Purple Heart decoration, he clearly had a special regard for its recipients.

Appl: As we make the comparison between the 24 elders and the innumerable multitude, while the Lamb has shed His own blood to wash them all, it becomes clear that He has a special place in his heart for those represented by these 24 elders. Note with me some of these differences.

A. The 24 elders have thrones around about God's throne (4:4 - the innumerable multitude stands before the throne - 7:9).

B. The 24 elders have crowns of gold on their heads (4:4 - the innumerable multitude have palm branches).

What is wonderful about the thrones and the crowns is that they become tools for bringing greater glory and worship to the one sitting on the throne of God (4:10-11).

C. The 24 elders have harps and golden vials full of fragrance, which are the prayers of the saints, perhaps the results of their own prayers (5:8). They use these to worship the Lamb in a special way, singing a new song (5:9).

D. The 24 elders are made kings and priests and they reign with their Sovereign on the earth during the millennial kingdom (5:10 - the innumerable multitude serve God

night and day in the heavenly temple during the millennium).

Appl2: Again, all of these added blessings that the 24 elders enjoy are only added opportunities to bring honor and glory to their Lamb in the coming age. That they are very close to the heart of their Lamb is clear from Jesus's many teachings on this subject, like the parable of the talents. Those who are faithful in little things in this age will get an opportunity to be faithful in much in the next—all for the glory of the Lamb.

Conclusion: So winning the war against the sinfulness of His people was the most important thing to the Lamb. We must be washed in the blood of the Lamb, saved from our sins, and raptured with these saints in glory.

But the military decorations of heaven are near and dear to the heart of the Lamb, as they were to Washington. In his order establishing the purple heart, Washington warned, "should any who are not entitled to these honors have the insolence to assume the badges of them they shall be severely punished."

Jesus has His medals of merit. Two simple things are important to living a life that will enjoy that millennial reward someday, and we find those in the encouragement of Christ to the two local churches that He did not have to correct, Smyrna and Philadelphia:

1. Be thou faithful unto death (Rev. 2:10).
2. Hold fast what you have (Rev. 3:11; see also 1 Cor. 3:10-21).

Jesus speaks these encouragements to faithfulness to local church-age believers. Each of us is called in this age to help build a local church – to edify followers of Jesus Christ in love. Be faithful in that warfare; holdfast in that warfare. And then you shall see how the Lamb decorates those who have fought that good fight, finished that course, and kept that faith.

“A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction – the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*