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All Saints' Day • Revelation 7:9–17 • November 2, 2014

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The celebration of saints has a checkered history in the church: raucous festivals around martyrs' graves, prayers to saints to escape various kinds of sufferings, fantastical stories of their lives, and even trust in their merits. The reformers in the sixteenth century were concerned about these abuses and how such focus on the saints could supplant preaching about God's great work in his Son. Saints should be honored but especially as recipients of God's grace, examples of divine mercy and faith (Ap XXI).

The text from Revelation 7 gives us precisely what the reformers sought. Who are these people who stretch across the heavenly horizon as a multicolor multitude from every nation, every people, every language (v. 9)? "Who are these clothed in white robes and from where have they come (v. 13)?" The answer is singularly focused on what God has done for them—they are marked by his grace, washed in the blood of the lamb. Though their sins may have been like scarlet, they are now white as new snow.

Revelation 7 has echoes of many texts from the Scriptures: Isaiah 49, Daniel 12, Matthew 24. In all these, the tribulation of God's people will be great, but God will preserve them in the end. Tears that were shed—from racking sobs to the long quiet grief—all will be wiped away (v. 17).

What is remarkable about this final judgment is how the deeds that were often a measure of the faithfulness of the saints—feeding the hungry, quenching the thirsty, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger (cf. Mt 25)—these are now done by God for his people. Washed and clothed in white robes, God will "shelter them with his presence . . . they shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more (v. 15–16)."

The reformers are known for the warnings against a theology too enamored with Christian works. Nothing is wrong with works *per se*. Do them. Admire them, if you will. But in the end only the works of God will last. The saints around the throne do not cry out, "Faithful were we! Great sacrifices did we bear! Admirable virtues did we cultivate!" No! It's "salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb! . . . Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen!" When all is said and done it is only the Word and work of God that is worthy of celebration. The saints know this . . . and you will know this too.

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