

*April 17, 2016*

*Revelation 7:9-17: **“The Hope of Heaven!”***

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In the book of Revelation, we read about what is called “the great tribulation.” While there are many opinions about the phrase - far too many opinions for us to address here - the surrounding context gives us the correct interpretation. The “great tribulation” includes all the sufferings of the people of God in every age until they enter into the kingdom of glory.

When John sees the multitude in white robes, he isn't just seeing a portion of the church at the very end, but he is seeing the entire church triumphant. Acts 14:21-22 is helpful. Paul and Barnabas preached the good news in the city of Derbe and won a large number of disciples. It then goes on to say, “Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. ‘Through many *tribulations* we must enter the kingdom of God,’ they said.”

Every generation of Christian is in tribulation to varying degrees. Most people identify tribulation with what is dramatic, such as the beheading of Christians and churches being blown up or converted into mosques. However, there is growing tribulation in our own country. Numbed Christians in America assume they are safe from persecution. In an article titled *Persecution of Christians in America: It's Not Just 'Over There,'* Fay Voshell refers to the observations made by Msgr. Charles Pope and Johnette Benkovic. They point out that persecution begins gradually and accelerates stage by stage:

The first stage begins with attempts to stereotype the targeted group...The second stage of persecution involves justifying hatred of a particular group...Stage three involves marginalizing Christians' role in society...The fourth stage of persecution involves criminalizing Christians and their churches, businesses, and educational institutions...Stage five involves persecuting Christians outright...[and] the last stage of persecution of Christians ends in their death.

If you are paying attention to the news, no further comment is necessary. Still, the “great tribulation” is more than just what we typically call persecution. We are stuck in the middle of a creation that now full of sin and sorrow and suffering. Many are the occasions when tears course down our cheeks and our hearts are heavy. There is the sickness of sin in each of us. The consequences of the fall are everywhere around us in a creation that is falling apart, the reality of death and decay, disease, old age, trying to survive day to day, conflicts, and on it goes. And Satan is always accusing us, dragging us down so low that we might even entertain the idea that God no longer cares about us and is even out to “get” us. There are a lot of heartaches for the Christian who longs to be with the Lord in heaven.

But, when our hearts are bowed down by the weight of trouble, sorrow, and suffering, we are encouraged to look upward and forward. Through John, we are brought to this heavenly vision. Through his eyes, we see the multitude in heavenly glory gathered around the throne of God. You have to ask along with the elder in the vision, “These in white robes - who are they, and where did they come from?” And, at first it may sound odd, but this multitude that John is looking at, and the white robes we are seeing through his eyes . . . well, we are seeing John, and it's you and it's me in the future.

And there we are in the gracious presence of the living God. And because God is pure love, we are in that love, and because there will be pure love, the hearts bowed down by the weight of trouble will be relieved. The sorrow and suffering will be no more. Such glory and happiness will be ours. As it says in our epistle lesson:

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

We will serve God. Do you know what it means to serve God in his temple day and night? The sinful flesh becomes bothered at the thought because it does not understand. All we can think of is some sort of forced labor where people are miserable all the time. But that is not what it means when it talks about serving God. Since God is pure love and since he loves us, to be in his temple day and night means to be constantly existing in perfect love which is fulfilment of all that is or can possibly be.

True worship will be a forever and constant living in a love that will never be interrupted which is true service, or serving God. We will be all that we were meant to be and we will be completely and forever satisfied. In sin, the sun, which was designed to be a picture of God, is something that we cannot endure. But, the fulfilment of the sun who is the Lamb at the center of the throne, will be a light that will not scorch, but will communicate a forever shepherding and a leading to a constant drinking of God who was, who is, and always will be. Sin will be no more, and our tears will be wiped away from our eyes. This is the end of the "great tribulation."

This is what we really want. We want to be embraced by God's love and feel eternally happy, content, connected to God and to one another. We want everything that is wrong down here to be made right. Don't we want to be connected and understand things. What a wonderful future then lies before us!

But, for now Paul writes, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known (1 Corinthians 13:12)." For now, by faith we cling to him, we pray to him, we walk with him in the means of grace, and we strive to live for him in all things. The "great tribulation" is right before our very eyes every single day in a wide variety of ways. So, what's the purpose of it all? Why must we face it? Why does the Lord allow it in our lives? The questions are not asked in the spirit of grumbling against God, or to put God on trial, but we need to understand God's heart toward us. Louis A. Brighton observes:

But even though the church suffers much, God protects her and cares for her (12:6, 14). And through her sufferings and persecution the church now reflects the suffering of Christ on the cross as she witnesses to that event, and by her steadfast faith and hope she exhibits the resurrection and life of Christ as she proclaims the saving message of Christ's victory.

If we share in the sufferings of Christ, we will share in his glory. In 1 Peter 1:3-9 we have all the answers. We have been given new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of the dead. Consequently, we have an inheritance that no one can take away. By faith in the blood of the Lamb, who makes our robes white, we are shielded by God power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed. And then it says this: "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith - of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."

So, why must we face tribulation? There are three reasons. First of all, God is keeping us in the true faith. We need them so that we do not love this fallen creation. By them we hold onto the Lord all the more in the midst of trouble and suffering as we daily wash our robes in the blood of the Lamb. Secondly, our faith, that does not let go of Christ, serves as a witness to the world. As we struggle along, our lips and our lives are always about the future glory in heaven that has been ratified by the resurrection of Jesus. And finally, when it is all said and done, it will serve to result in praise, glory and honor on the last day. God will display Satan's inability to destroy the church's faith, and thus God will display Christ's victory over Satan and death.

That which will preserve us and bring us to forever heaven is not our own will-power or any good works that we may do. Rather, the elder in our epistle lesson says, "and did wash their flowing robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." This is what will see us through the "great tribulation." As it says in Hebrews 9:14, "How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God." Indeed, what gets us through is **The Hope of Heaven!**

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott