

“The Ones Coming Out of the Great Tribulation”  
(Revelation 7:13-14)  
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The text: ***“Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, ‘Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?’ <sup>14</sup>I said to him, ‘Sir, you know.’ And he said to me, ‘These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’”***

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. There is a basic pattern in life that repeats itself over and over again. The pattern is represented in the Greek word from Revelation 7:14 *thlipsis* which is variously translated as “trial,” “affliction,” “distress,” and perhaps the most popular way of translating it especially here in Revelation: “tribulation”. The basic life pattern is that we are permitted by God in His mercy to go through tribulation and then – and most importantly – we are allowed to “come out of it.” Revelation 7:14 is a glorious description of all the saints, all of the Christians, what is called “the church triumphant,” all of you in glory with all other Christians throughout the ages finally released from all trial, from all affliction, from all distress, and from all tribulation. The picture is one of finally having arrived from this time of conflict and the end result is glory.

We see mini-versions of this even on this side of heaven. Some men and women enter the military and the first test is to make it through boot-camp. Boot-camp is grueling, but if one is strong enough to make it through, then there is – literally – a graduation and it is evident that the one who has completed the course is stronger and more vital than ever before. The soldier has passed this first major tribulation. When I minister to some of you who have gone through various surgeries: the process is like a tribulation. There is a period of anxiety working up to the surgery, then the surgery itself, then the time of healing. When it passes in success, you have a sense of release from the tribulation. If you are in college pursuing your bachelor’s degree, or master’s, or doctorate, the work in the midst of trying to finish is your tribulation, then graduation finally comes and you “come out of it,” you experience a release. If you are pregnant and you deal with the discomfort, and sometimes dietary restrictions, then the labor and the pain – this is the tribulation – then the release comes when you “come out of it.” When you are in a storm and you think you might die (you are in a tribulation of fear and anxiety), then there is calm when you come out of it, this is being released from tribulation; when you are unemployed and the strain of trying to make ends meet (this is a tribulation), then you find a new job and things are much better, you are released from the tribulation, you come out of it. Sometimes you are in the middle of a strained or rupturing relationship, you can be hurt, feel betrayed, feel broken-hearted, this is a tribulation, then God intervenes to give you hope, when that hope leads to healing and the Lord fills your needs you are released from your tribulation and you come out of it. When you are sick that too is a tribulation and you look forward to the day of release, when you will not have to deal with that chronic condition anymore, when it will be gone, wiped away, you come out of tribulation.

What John saw in his vision in Revelation were all the Christians who had ever lived coming out of all of their tribulations combined. And the sum total of all tribulations combined is what Revelation 7:14 calls the “great tribulation.” Some want to say that this adjective “great”

can only point to the very end time when Satan is released for a “little while” just before Jesus comes again in glory (Revelation 20:2 and 20:7), but this will not hold. First of all, Revelation itself does not refer to the very end that way. Furthermore, Jesus referred to the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem as a “great tribulation” in Matthew 24:21. The point is this: “since every Christian experiences testings of faith and witness...[that] becomes at that moment in time existentially a great tribulation for that believer. The picture of eternal glory of Rev. 7:14 is for the comfort of all Christians of all times as they experience whatever tribulations sorely test their faith and patience...For that Christian at that moment, his sufferings and trials are his great tribulation. And every Christian will experience tribulation (Brighton, Louis A., *Concordia Commentary: Revelation*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999, 196f).”

For you and for whatever you go through that tests your faith and causes you to feel the burden of sin (your own and that which you encounter in others and from the world), that is your great tribulation. It comes in many forms. Imprisonment, derision, poverty, sickness, inner distress and sorrow, anxiety or fear (Kittel, Gerhard, Ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Volume III*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965, 143f). The power of all tribulation is that it makes us feel our weakness and it makes us face our own mortality. In truth, it destroys our outward man, it causes our body – as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4 to “waste away.” Tribulations take a toll on our bodies, our hearts, our minds, our nerves, our emotions, we joke about it, but when the grey hairs come in, that is the sign of many mini tribulations and the results are evident. A few years ago I had had lunch with my family and I was standing out in the parking lot to say goodbye to my daughter Elizabeth and as we were talking on a bright sunny day, I guess the sun was reflecting on my head and as I was talking to her, she was staring at the top of my head and I couldn’t tell if her face had the expression of amazement or concern (maybe a little of both), she put her hand up to touch my head and she said, “you have a lot more white hairs than I thought,” I joked with her and said, “my symbols of wisdom,” and then she said, “wisdom or more kids?” There was of course some truth in what she was saying. Raising children indeed is a form of tribulation. Ask some of the kids and they will tell you that being raised by parents is a form of tribulation! We just can’t get away from it!

Some might say that this Tuesday represents a tribulation for us as a nation. In the LC-MS we maintain the two kingdoms taught in Scripture: the Kingdom of God’s grace through the Church and the kingdom of political power in the civil realm. We cannot, therefore, say that God is either a Republican or Democrat. At the same time, there are real intersections between the two kingdoms. How do we live in this political tribulation?

First, be active and faithful in your vocation as a citizen of this great nation: VOTE. Be a good steward and exercise your right that God has granted in this land of freedom.

Second, vote your conscience with the light of the Word of God. Consider the platforms carefully – and while we realize that no political platform does justice to God’s pure Word – in the meantime do not be ashamed to defend what Scripture teaches as much as you possibly can in your heart and in your mind as you vote; and look to defend: (1) religious freedom; (2) the life of the unborn; and (3) the sanctity of marriage as originated in the Word of God. These are not examples of narrow-minded “single issue politics,” but barometers of entire worldviews that will either protect the moral fiber of this land or contribute to its demise.

Third, regardless of what happens, never put your trust in princes (Psalm 146), because your real help and hope is in the Lord. Neither the democrats nor the republicans are your savior.

But let us return to what is even more important: we have listed the names of many precious loved ones in our bulletin today. These were saints like you, people loved by Jesus and they went through tribulation. What they experienced, we too will experience. For some of us, our greatest tribulations are yet to come, and the greatest one -- hands down -- is death.

But these tribulations serve a purpose. There is always a purpose! They cause you to despair of yourself; they cause you to say, "I can't do this on my own!" They serve a purpose to lead you to the only One who can help you, the only One who can save you. So notice that in Revelation 7:14 these who have come out of the great tribulation -- what many of you are going through right at this moment -- they (first of all) "come out of it"...the time comes when it ends; it doesn't last; the release comes and oh what joy it will be! But how were they sustained? What got the saints through? Revelation 7:14: "They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." The two verbs here are active, and yet this Scripture points back to what **God did** for us! How are we washed and made so clean even through our great tribulation? We are washed by the blood of the Lamb!

**Isaiah 1:18:** *"Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool."*

Your sin is forgiven through the blood of Christ (1 Jn 1:7-9; 2:1-2), and covered now with the righteousness of the Lamb (Rom 3:22; 10:4), and as a result, you share the victory of the Lamb before the heavenly Father. But this Gospel for you has led you also to an active life flowing from your baptism where you receive your "washing" (Eph 5:26; Titus 3:5). This active life of every, single one of the saints in glory while they were on earth and of you the people of God on earth at this moment, what you all have in common while on earth is to live in your baptism. By the Holy Spirit you live in repentance and faith (this is your active washing). This is your way of life by grace through faith in Jesus, to return to Jesus the author and perfecter of your faith -- every single day in your tribulation -- to repent and to fall before Him and say, "Lord I need you, my only Savior!" And every, single day He keeps you washed, no matter how messy your tribulation may be. He keeps you in His righteousness and covered by His blood, so that you are as cleansed as pure white snow! This Jesus has guaranteed, because He entered your tribulation and took on the sins of all in the tribulation when He lived for you, died for you with all of your tribulation sins heaped on Him on the cross, and then rose to defeat the most powerful tribulation called death and because He lives this vision is true, it is verified, it is guaranteed as also belonging to you who trust in Christ:

*"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 shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."* (Revelation 7:15-17)

And yes – in the meantime – while it is true that the tribulation takes a toll...we feel it in our bodies and we feel it in our minds, *this*, however, is not the whole story! ***“So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.”*** (2 Corinthians 5:16-17)

The faithful martyrs and saints have come out of their tribulation and are in glory; you dear Christian are still in the midst of your tribulation, but take heart in the vision of Revelation 7! God is also making you *coming out of* your tribulation and there is purpose in it while you are here, it causes you to lean on Christ; to live in the patience of faith; to be His living witness as your faith is only strengthened as you feel increasingly weak in yourself, but increasingly strong in Christ. In Christ even death is transformed, because for you it will be a release to know the Lamb -- who has always been your Shepherd – who will lead you to springs of living water and God will wipe away every tear from your eyes. This is our future glory, our future release, may this truth strengthen us here and now to be faithful, to do the work He has called us to do, and to walk powerfully in the Holy Spirit to continue to proclaim the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to the world...a world that is certainly suffering tribulation, but more importantly a world for which Jesus Christ died and rose and wants all to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. The world needs to know: tribulation has been covered by the victory of Jesus Christ!