

“Our Shepherd Through Tribulation”

(Revelation 7:9-17)

(Modified from the sermon on April 21st, 2013)

Pastor Espinosa

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. Many Christians are intimidated by the book of Revelation, but in reality we have nothing to fear for at least two reasons: First, though Revelation may *seem* confusing with its apocalyptic genre and all of that symbolism and figurative language, it really isn't confusing, but is in fact extremely simple: our Lord Jesus Christ wins! He wins over sin, He wins over death, and He wins over the devil. But it would be better said that Christ has *won...when He said “It is finished!” (John 19:30) from the cross of Calvary, our Lord wasn't kidding!* So some would say you don't really need to preach too much on Revelation, because it is in fact very simple: it's about Jesus the Victor! Christus Victor!

But the other reason some might be intimidated by the book is because of the considerable confusion which swirls *around* this book. In other words some might say, “I don't want to enter the controversy, so let's simply avoid the book altogether!” Nothing would please our enemy the devil more, because then you and I would lose out in the tremendous comfort God offers in this book.

The problem of confusion, however, isn't on account of the book which when approached correctly is straight-forward enough, but when false teaching is *injected* into the text, then you have the recipe for rousing fear and anxiety. It is imperative, however, that we do not accept the idea that Revelation is just a scary book to be avoided, it isn't. When the true message of Christ's victory comes out, then it is in fact extremely comforting. You have nothing to fear, Jesus has been victorious for you.

In other words we do *indeed* have good reason to study the book of Revelation. It reveals that you are God's people, you are disciples of Jesus and therefore Jesus wants you to enjoy the powerful comfort in this book; *and* Jesus desires that you be protected from the false teaching which surrounds this book! So let's get it right and let's apply God's comfort to the sin we battle!

There are two main verses from Revelation 7 that I'd like to focus on, the first being Revelation 7:14. Let's read what the heavenly elder said to John the apostle who received this amazing vision from God:

“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.”

There are compelling arguments which assert that “the great tribulation” is in reference to *all* tribulations combined together in the life of the Church on earth (e.g. Lenski). Our challenge, however, is trying to understand “the great tribulation” in the context of the book of Revelation. This is where controversy swirls around the book. For example, we are amillennialist which means that we properly believe that the 1000 years mentioned in Revelation chapter 20 (six times to boot) is a symbolic reference to the time of the Church (10 cubed is the perfect time-

frame for Christ's Church to exist on earth before our Lord comes again). At the same time, we have to admit that many in the early church believed in a form of premillennialism. There was an urgent expectation of Christ's second coming. Many were convinced that Jesus would return in their life-time and that Jesus would establish an earthly kingdom. These two viewpoints make it even more interesting in trying to understand whether "the great tribulation" is a cumulative tribulation over the course of Church history, or a climatic tribulation towards the end of Church history.

There are, however, other popular teachings that are not only recent in origin, but also *stretch* the meaning of God's Word to say the very least. This includes teachings about the rapture and the great tribulation.

One of those things that we need to take into consideration is that there is a definite article directing this reference in the original language in Revelation 7: this is *the* tribulation, **the** great one (Revelation 7:14). The Scriptures seem clear in Revelation 20 that Satan is going to be released from his bondage for a "little season," a short period before Christ comes again. In other words, there seems to be biblical warrant that at some point in human history things do indeed get progressively worse. In our day it is easy to feel as though we might be in this season of decline:

1. In our world today, would you say that it is easier or more difficult to protect marriage in the sense of staying together?
2. In our world today, would you say that it is easier or more difficult to protect the unborn?
3. In our world today, would you say that it is easier or more difficult to defend biblical marriage between a man and a woman?
4. In our world today, would you say that it is easier or more difficult to hear the true saving Gospel proclaimed?

While it is true that the Church since the first century has considered herself to be living in the end times, I would not be surprised if we aren't already living in Satan's little season. Maybe we are, maybe we aren't, but there is one thing we *do* know:

The tribulation that you go through as a child of God is often perceived "great" -- very serious and severe -- and even while we comfort ourselves with the reminder that there are others who suffer more than we do, this tribulation can be perilous because it can sometimes even threaten our faith.

We also know this, Acts 14:22:

"...through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."

This word is not the word for persecution in the more direct sense: *dioko*, but is the particular and unique word: *Thlipsis* = also translated as "trial," "affliction," and "distress." All of these other words help us to understand what is encompassed in the word "tribulation." A trial is a hardship which causes you strain, an affliction is something upon you which causes you to

suffer, and distress represents the emotional turmoil within you as you go through these things. On account of sin coming into the world and our own sin we go through tribulation. As you can see I'm presenting tribulation both in the sense of external causes upon us and internal causes within us (this is the biblical gamut).

This first picture is a representation of the tribulation called depression:



This second one is a picture of the tribulation that might be called addiction:



Sometimes we limit the concept of addiction to alcohol or substance abuse, but it can be related to any one of a myriad of things we might struggle with. These things are certainly related to the realm of psychology, but why does *any* form of affliction even exist? Answer: sin has entered the world. The fruit of the Spirit includes self-control, but the assault of sin is a lack of it. If you struggle this way, you are *not* abnormal.

But there are also tribulations in relationships:



And there are man-made tribulations in the world. All we need here is one word: ISIS.

And there are natural disasters which most certainly represent severe tribulations:



So how in the world does any Christian possibly stand up in the face of tribulation? I've just presented a very short list (the *actual* list of what we face in this world is much, much longer). How does the Christian keep their faith? Revelation 7:14 tells us. Those who have come out of tribulation, come out with one thing that marks them. One thing is highlighted. It is what got them through. Just one thing:

“They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

Over the years I've had the opportunity to lead people to experience the powerful resource of individual confession and absolution (this little service is in our current Lutheran Service Book, our LC-MS hymnal). For Lutheran Christians the resource is free and completely confidential. Pastor Mueller and I are happy to serve you with it and no, we will not see you differently if you use it. God's Word has already revealed your condition to us. But the point here is that when we confess our sin we are not merely confessing our violations of the Law of God. Confession certainly *includes* these things, but confession also includes the weight of sin in the world that presses us from every side. Confession includes our feeling the crushing pressure of our tribulation.

Every, single time we confess -- even in private prayer and in constant faith -- we are given the Gospel of Jesus, the forgiveness of sins, the blood of Jesus that covers our sin and

tribulation, and guarantees that God is on our side. How do we know that God is on our side? One reason: the blood of the Lamb. And it's yours and it means that no matter what you face, the Lord is with you, because if He died for you (and He did) and if He proves His love for you (and He does as He has established the Holy Ministry for you), then He is for you! That's how the saints make it through tribulation! And Revelation 7:14 is proof that they do! Even through the great tribulation! Amen!

But Revelation gets more comforting! Here is the second verse as we head home for this sermon, Revelation 7:17:

“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.”

The Lord doesn't just get us through. He leads us to the living water; eternal life and will fill us with inexpressible joy. Tribulation ends and this is depicted by the powerful words: “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” Claim this Scripture, God is talking about *your* tears wiped away from *your* eyes!

What is truly awesome about all of this is that in Revelation 7:17 the Lamb who shed His blood to give us what we needed in order to stand in the midst of tribulation is *also* the shepherd. For all intents and purposes Revelation 7:17 is the vision of Psalm 23 fulfilled. He is your Shepherd, you have all you need, and He guides you to green pastures, to still waters, He restores your soul! The Lamb who shed His blood also then takes you by the hand and says, “I will lead you!” And that leading happens like it's happening right now, as you cling to the Word of Jesus and He guides you and me through this tribulation-filled life! Tribulation can't condemn you, because Jesus the Lamb covers you with His blood; tribulation can't defeat you, because Jesus the Shepherd defends you through His life.



Revelation 7:17 announces that what Psalm 23 describes *was* your life and that the victory of Christ over all tribulation became your victory. And the victory dear Christian is guaranteed as you have actively washed your robes again (Revelation 7:14 is an active verb).

That is, you have come, and Jesus does the rest: He supplies His blood, He supplies His rod, He supplies His staff, and He sees to it that you come out of your tribulation. Rejoice!

23 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. **2** He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. **3** He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. **4** Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. **5** Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. **6** Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.