

Sermon – 10/06/2007 am

Triumph through Tribulation

Study Text: Revelation 7:13-17

On the farm where I grew up was a big shed built by my grandfather. We called it the barn. On the end of this was a lean-to with a bench, an anvil, and a set of bellows. A blacksmiths would come and make horseshoes and plough shares here. He would heat the metal in the coal fire till it was red hot. Then he would take a hammer and beat this metal until it was in the shape that he wanted, a shape that was useful for the farmer business.

The Lord does much the same thing with his people. He takes some raw material; sinners like you and me, and makes us into the people he wants, people that will be useful to him. He wants people who will worship him and serve him with utter faithfulness. How does God make us like this? He will put us through the fire as it were. He will allow us to suffer, to go through times of testing in order to mould us into the people he wants.

The Great Tribulation

John looked and saw the great multitude standing before the throne in heaven (7:9). He wrote down what he saw. The next thing John knew was one of the elders asking him a question. The elder said to him ‘who are these arrayed in white robes and where did they come from’ (7:13)? This is a continuation of the vision that began in chapter 4.

John was taken aback. He thought he was just a spectator but suddenly he became part of the vision. There are no spectators in heaven and there should be no spectators in the church on earth. We come to worship God not to watch what others are doing. We come to join in the ministry of the church, to encourage and support one another that God might be glorified in us.

The elder asked John a question but John knew that this elder knew more than he did. John was still alive on this earth. This elder had gone ahead and was living in heaven. He understood much more than any Christian living in this world. ‘Sir you know’ said John. And the elder graciously proceed to tell john who these white-robed ones around the throne and where they had come from.

These are the ones who have come out of the great tribulation he said – or lit. ‘The tribulation, great’ (7:14). Opinions differ as to what this great tribulation means. Do all Christians share in this or not? Dispensationalists say no, that this is a period (of 7 years) just before the end in which the restored Jewish nation will besuffer unprecedented attack by anti Christian forces. Others say this passage refers only to martyrs. But note that it is not their own blood in which they have washed their robes and made them white – it is the blood of the Lamb.

In chapter 1 John was writing a personal note to the churches of Asia. He wrote by way of introduction to him who loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood (1:6). He was referring to the atonement, and the elder was referring to the atonement here also. Only the blood of Christ can wash us clean from sin. Only the blood of Jesus can make our hearts whiter than the snow (Psal~~m~~1), or in symbolism clothe us in white robes.

Those who have come out of the great tribulation are the same ones whom John saw before the throne – those in white robes. They came from all nations not just one nation. If all believers are included in the great multitude around the throne as we previously suggested, then all believers have come through the great tribulation.

What might be the Old Testament background to this tribulation? Daniel spoke of a time of great trouble/tribulation (Daniel 12:1). But we have New Testament teaching about tribulation also. Jesus told his disciples that tribulation and death lay head of them (Matthew 24:9). His last words to them were *in this world you will have tribulation* (John 16:33) – but note he also said *be of good cheer for I have overcome the world*. Paul taught that we must go through many tribulations to enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22).

Neither Jesus nor Paul taught that only a few would or only a certain group would go through tribulation. This does not mean that suffering will not be more intense for some than others or that it will not intensify as the end approaches. But tribulation for Christians is the norm not the exception. Job was just going about his business when he came under attack. All true believers will be targeted by Satan who opposes everything Godly and good.

The Christians in Asia were simply worshipping Jesus when they were targeted. False teachers told them to compromise – it does not matter if you join with the pagans in their feasts and their worship. The Jews from the synagogue of Satan reported them to the authorities. And the emperor who claimed to be Lord and god violently repressed any who refused to worship him as such. These were just ordinary believers like us who found themselves in the midst of great tribulation.

Remember the parable of the sower – or more correctly parable of the soils. What happened to the seed that fell among the rocks? It grew up and flourished for a while but then what happened? Drought came so the plant withered and produced no fruit. In the same way you will come upon hard times, times of testing. Will you come through?

What is the secret to producing fruit? – deep soil, soil that has been ploughed deep and often. The farmer ploughs with deep rippers to break up the hard soil in order that the crop will give a harvest. Even so the Lord allows your heart to be deeply ripped at times, to be pummeled and trampled on, that you might be fruitful in the end.

Listen to this amazing statement I found in one commentary. From the point of view of the mighty spiritual struggles between God and Satan whether a man lives or dies is not of ultimate importance. The all important issue is whether he worships Christ, or antichrist (Ladd). This is what it is all about. It is not about life and death but about faithfulness to Jesus. This is the message of this book. It was for Christians being persecuted in the first century and it is for us today.

As for me and my house we will serve the Lord said Joshua. For me to live in Christ and to die is gain said the apostle Paul. They face grace challenges in life. They faced opposition and suffering. Can you from your heart echo their philosophy of life? We don't hear much about tribulation these days. You don't find many books entitled 'how to suffer', or 'victory through death'. But this is the message of this book and indeed the whole Bible Jesus was victorious through suffering and death.

I can't do you might be saying to yourself. And you would be right. You can't do it on your own. You can only do it in Christ. Be of good cheer because I have overcome the world said

Jesus (John 16:33). This is the victory that has overcome the world – your faith (I John 5:5). Nothing can separate you from the love of Christ not even death because Christ lives in you. You are his and no one can pluck you out of his hand.

Serve

Having come out of the great tribulation then what? In his introduction John went on to tell the seven churches that Jesus has made us kings and priests to his God and father (1:6). We find the same words again in 5:10. Priests stand at the altar serving God. These white robed ones do so day and night. They have been saved to serve. God is with them; he tabernacles or dwells with them. They are gathered around his throne as priests ready to serve him at any time – like children who always want to please their father.

Some people ask about what we will do in heaven. Some think it will be a great long holiday. But would that not get boring? People who have nothing to do get bored – they do not feel happy. The picture of heaven we have is not one of idleness but of serving God – around the clock as it were. What a joy it will be for those who know Jesus as their saviour, and love the Lord their God with all their heart all their souls and all their mind, to serve him unceasingly. If this is how it will be in heaven should you not be preparing yourself even now?

Bliss

For the joy set before him Jesus endured the Cross and its shame (Hebrews 12:2). Jesus knew that beyond death, even as agonising and terrible as it was for him, that beyond death lay the joy and the glory of being with his heavenly Father. Paul similarly knew that glory awaited him beyond the suffering of this world (Romans 8:18, Philippians 1:21). According to Hendriksen the Dutch have a term for dying which literally means ‘to get over/beyond suffering’.

As this part of his vision comes to an end John describes the bliss of heaven. He describes life as it was meant to be in the beginning, and as it now is in the kingdom of Heaven. Hunger and thirst are no more. While we might be struggling with obesity millions in this world go to bed hungry every night. Millions have a struggle to get sufficient water. We may not be far behind. Drought and famine are part of the tribulation, as is the scorching heat of the sun. In heaven such things will be no more. Imagine not hearing about climate change ever again!

For the Lamb...will shepherd them and lead them to fountains of living water (7:17). Here is another paradox – the Lamb being the shepherd. A shepherd usually leads the lambs. But this lamb sacrificed himself and rose again to be the mighty Lamb upon the throne. He ever lives to protect and provide for his flock, for you and me into eternity. Even as he lived Jesus offered such freedom and bliss to the woman at the well (John 4). He who believes in Jesus will never thirst. Even now you can drink from this fountain of living water.

No more death, nor sorrow, nor crying nor pain (21:4). In heaven there is no death and no crying. *God will wipe away every tear from their eyes (7:17).* There would have been a lot of weeping in the church at Pergamum when Antipas was killed. We all know what tears are – some more than others. Who will wipe our tears? We look here and there for someone to comfort us. Some even pay for a shoulder to cry on. God will remove every reason we might have for crying. He has already removed death through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

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