

Sermon outline and notes:

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## Revelation 6-18 “Signs of the End Times: Global Proclamation and Persecution”

Intro. Jesus said in Mt. 24:32-33, “Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near—at the doors!” I believe that the signs of the times are increasingly pointing to the return of Christ. That is exciting! Yet before the glorious return of Christ this world will experience some of its darkest days.

In this series I am giving special focus on the signs of the end times that are found in the book of Revelation. I would expect that what we read about in the prophecy of the book of Revelation will *begin* to be fulfilled in some respects even before the final seven years described in this book. As we have already seen in this series, the stage is being set for the fulfillment of the prophecies of Revelation.

Tonight, we will look at two more signs that we are getting close to the return of Christ. The first is:

### I. THE GOSPEL WILL REACH THE NATIONS

Jesus Himself gave this as one of the most significant signs of His return. He said in Matt. 24:14, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.” Furthermore, when He gave His Great Commission (Matt. 28:19), He said that we were to make disciples of *all* nations. Then He assured us of His presence when we go to the nations by saying, “...and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Jesus implies that the task of world evangelism will be pursued until the end of the age, when He returns in glory.

Now let’s see from Revelation that before Jesus comes again, the Gospel *will* be both proclaimed and received by all nations. Look at Rev. 7:9, “Behold, a great multitude which no one could number ...” John has a vision of a great multitude in heaven. How many people would it take to have a number that no one could count? This probably describes hundreds of millions of people. So it is very clear that heaven will not be sparsely populated. Those cults and religious groups that think they are the only ones going to heaven are clearly wrong.

Then notice in v.9 that this huge number of believers will not only be innumerable, but also come from “all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues...” So the Great Commission *will* be fulfilled before the return of Christ, according to the book of Revelation.

Yet, does John’s vision of the multitude in heaven include all the saints of all the ages? No! Look at v.14 and we will see what time period will fulfill the Gospel to all nations, “These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” So this multitude from all nations and tribes are tribulation saints. So this number represents only one segment of the redeemed of the ages. So this implies that the Great Commission may not be fulfilled until the time of the Great Tribulation, which immediately precedes the Second Coming. Or if the rapture is toward the end of the tribulation, most of this multitude could have been saved before the tribulation even begins. Or if the rapture is before the tribulation, then such a large multitude from every nation and people group would

have to be saved after the tribulation begins, during the final seven years, presumably from the witness of the 144,000 also described in chapter 7.

How are we doing toward reaching this goal? I believe that this prophecy is not far from being fulfilled. The world mission of the Church is in fact being implemented, and in many areas is gaining ground. In Africa south of the Sahara the expansion is probably greater than many areas. Even the persecution of the saints during the tribulation will evidently not suppress the spread the gospel, but perhaps expand the spread of the gospel, just like we read about in Acts 8:1-4. The more the antichrist fans the flames of repression, the more the Holy Spirit fans the flames of revival! Some Christians may even flee to the relative safety of remote people groups, where they will find a way to share the gospel. Also consider this: I was surprised to learn that 80% of the world's adult population owns a smart phone. These have translation apps and also multitudes have access to the gospel through their smart phone. So far this year my sermons have been listened to on sermonaudio.com over 5,500 times in 75 different countries. I'm so thankful to have that means of spreading the gospel and strengthening believers.

However, we still have a good way to go to fulfill the task. I asked D. Ray Davis of the IMB about this. He directed me to peoplegroups.org, where we see that there are 11,946 people groups in the world of 7.9 billion people. Yet there are still 3,181 unreached people groups representing 279 million people who have not yet been engaged with the Gospel. That means we still have a ways to go to fulfill the vision of Rev. 7 of believers, not only from all nations, but also all "tribes, peoples, and tongues." However, Dr. Brian Autrey reported just this morning that our IMB began works among 247 unengaged people groups just this year. At that rate we could finish the task in just 13 years!

So here we have a great motive to fulfill the Great Commission to get the gospel to the ends of the earth. Jesus will *not* return to judge evil and give peace on earth until the task is finished. So if we want Jesus to return, we must finish the task!<sup>1</sup> The evangelization of the world is the only hope of mankind! Furthermore, since we are told here that this salvation is for all nations, we should do whatever we can to take the good news of this salvation not only to the people of our community, but also to the ends of the earth. We need to go, pray, and give to our Lottie Moon mission offering. Let's complete the mission! I wonder if anyone would surrender to become a missionary to a people group who has yet to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ? As we have seen, there are over 3000 of them that still need to be reached for Christ.

Joyce, Don and I had a great experience last year as we traveled to the Pedi people group in northern South Africa. I preached the gospel several times in a tent meeting. We visited in homes and in a health clinic where we shared the gospel, resulting in almost 20 professions of faith in Christ. We prayed for this sick and strengthened local believers in their faith. I encourage you to consider going on our next international mission trip.

Now turn over the chapter 13, and the second sign of the end times I will talk about is this:

## II. CHRISTIANS WILL FACE INCREASED PERSECUTION

I found at least 9 references to Christian persecution in chapters 6-18 of the book of Revelation (6:9-11; 7:16-17; 12:11, 17; 13:7, 10, 15; 17:6; 18:24). That's in addition to at least three references to persecution in chapters 2-3, which describes John's time period and beyond.

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<sup>1</sup> By the way, the pretribulational rapture view does not require us to complete the task, since it can be completed during the tribulation.

For example, we read in chapter 13, v.7, “It was granted to him [the antichrist] to make war with the saints and to overcome them....” Notice that “it was granted to him....” He could only do so by the permission of God. So antichrist will initiate a massive program of persecution against the people of God. Now notice from the book of Revelation:

A. The Various Means of Persecution – One result of the work of the antichrist will be:

1. Hunger and Thirst - In chapter 7, v.16 we read, “They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore....” Why would these believers experience hunger? In chapter 13 we will see that the tribulation saints will not be able to buy or sell without the mark of the beast, which they will refuse to receive. Therefore, they will face some degree of hunger and thirst for refusing to take the mark of the beast.

2. Imprisonment - This is implied in Revelation 13:10, “He who leads into captivity shall go into captivity; he who kills with the sword must be killed with the sword. Here is the patience and the faith of the saints.” This is a warning to those who participate in the persecution of Christians, which I will talk about later. The point is, “captivity” can refer to being taken as a prisoner.<sup>2</sup> Also, Revelation 2:10 says, “Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw *some* of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days....”

3. Even Death - In Rev. 6:9 John saw the souls of “those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held.” Then v.15 of chapter 13 John says that the false prophet “was granted power to give breath to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak and cause as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed.” There will be a veritable bloodbath of those who refuse to worship the beast, the antichrist. We also see in chapter 13 that these tribulation saints refuse to take the mark of the beast, and die a martyr’s death, refusing to renounce Jesus. John explains one reason why in chapter 12, v.11, “and they did not love their lives to the death.” These Christians loved Jesus more than their earthly lives and they made up their minds that they were going all the way with Jesus.

Though these verses have prophetic significance, I believe they were first written to encourage believers who would face persecution in John’s day and following. The Roman Empire persecuted the church in 10 different waves of persecution, and they totally failed to defeat the church because “they did not love their lives to the death.” These saints knew well the word of Christ who said, “Whoever will save his life shall lose it; and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it” (Mt. 16:25). So what we read about in Revelation is not something new to the history of the Church. Even in John’s day the Roman Emperors were claiming to be a god, the Savior of the World. They set up images of themselves all over the Roman Empire and demanded that everyone burn incense to that image and bow in worship and say, “Caesar is Lord.” The Emperor Domitian, who died in 96 A.D., was the first to do so. Those who refused faced imprisonment or death, including in the Coliseum in Rome. This same demand was made of the aged bishop Polycarp in 155 A.D., and after refusing, he was tortured and his body burned.

Yet what victory they had over their persecutors! The Church just kept on growing! What can Satan do with the likes of these? Lock them up in prison, and they convert their jailers (Acts 16:30-34); torture them, and they become partakers of Christ’s sufferings (Php. 1:29; 3:10) and heirs to a great reward (Mt. 5:12); martyr them, and they go straight to be with Christ (2 Cor. 5:8;

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<sup>2</sup> Literally this is taking someone captive at the edge of a spear, often to sell them into slavery.

Php. 1:21, 23); turn them loose, and they evangelize the world! Are you willing to be faithful unto Christ, even unto death?

Revelation also tells us that this worldwide persecution is:

B. Inspired by Satan - Notice what John says in chapter 12, v.17, "And the dragon was enraged with the woman [symbolic of Israel], and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ." The Dragon is one of the names for Satan.

Why does he persecute God's people? First, part of the answer is the close identification of Christ with His people. To persecute Christians is to persecute Christ (Acts 9:4). Satan hates Jesus, and so he will attack anything and anyone associated with Jesus. After all, we are the body of Christ.

So when you face persecution as a Christian, remember there is an evil power at work, inciting such persecution.

This worldwide persecution of the last days will also be:

C. Led by Antichrist – Again, chapter 13, v.7 says, "It was granted to him [the antichrist] to make war with the saints and to overcome them..." He is a willing servant of the devil, to carry out his reign of terror against God's people, because according to Rev. 13:2, "The dragon gave him his power, his throne, and great authority." Yes, he is empowered by the devil. Then, in v.8 we see one reason why the antichrist will persecute God's people, "All who dwell on the earth will worship him..." (cf. 17:8b). The whole non-Christian world will follow the antichrist, and even worship him. The only ones who will not worship the antichrist will be God's people. Why is that? In Matthew 4:10 Jesus said to the devil, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.'" So he will attack them for their non-compliance. Communists, Marxists, and other dictators do not tolerate non-conformity to their demands, and they especially hate it when Christian say there is an Authority higher than government. After all, the apostle Peter rightly said in Acts 5:29, "We ought to obey God rather than men." So the antichrist will characterize Christians as enemies of the state, troublemakers against the new World Order.<sup>3</sup>

By the way, the ungodly of this world will gladly support his persecution because of our stand for righteousness. Jesus said in Mt. 5:10, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The abortionists, the homosexuals, the pornographers, and the drug and alcohol industry will rise up and persecute those who do not support their agenda.

Furthermore, this persecution will be:

D. Supported by His False Prophet (13:7) and False Religion - John says in chapter 17, v.6, "I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus..." The "woman" here represents the worldwide apostate church, which will use its influence to slaughter millions of true believers and they will do it in the name of religion. Jesus warned of this in John 16:2, "... yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service."

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<sup>3</sup> Rev. 18:24 says this about the kingdom of the antichrist, "And in her was found the blood of prophets, and of saints, and of all that were slain upon the earth." Satan and his minions have used the power of government to kill multitudes of innocent people down through the centuries.

So this should not be unexpected. Remember, it was the religious leaders that murdered Jesus. They also persecuted His apostles and others (cf. Rev. 2:9-10; 3:9). The Roman Catholic Church led the persecution against believers during the Reformation period for many years. False religion has always persecuted the true.

Even if Christians are removed before the tribulation as many evangelicals believe, we can expect persecution to increase as we get closer to the end times. We are seeing a significant increase in hostility toward Christians, even in the U.S.A. where we are supposed to be protected by the First Amendment. The pandemic has only made things worse, as authorities have closed down or strictly limited church gatherings, and fined or arrested pastors, especially in places like Canada and Australia.

Now let me conclude this message on a positive note by sharing:

E. How to Have Victory over Persecution - The last of chapter 13, v.10 tells us of the patient endurance and faith of the saints during this time of persecution. God's people will patiently endure trials and persecutions when we do the following. First, we should:

1. Trust in God's Justice – In Rev. 6:10 the martyred saints in heaven cry out “with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’” The next verse gives the implicit answer, “a little while longer.” Then in Rev. 13:10 we read, “He who leads into captivity shall go into captivity; he who kills with the sword must be killed with the sword. Here is the patience and the faith of the saints.” This is a statement of poetic justice. Those who put Christians into the captivity of prison will be put in a far worse prison someday. And those who kill Christians will themselves be killed. God is not mocked. Whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap (Gal. 6:7-8). Speaking of poetic justice, numerous times during the Great Tribulation we read that God judges the world for their persecution of Christians by turning things into blood (6:12; 8:7-8; 11:6; 16:3-6). Indeed, Rev. 16:6 says, “For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, And You have given them blood to drink. For it is their just due.”<sup>4</sup>

So if you are unjustly punished because of your faith in Christ, remember Paul's exhortation in Rom. 12:19, “Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.” You can be sure that God will judge these persecutors who do not repent. Pray (Mt. 5:44) that they do repent.

2. Trust in God's Promises – This includes the oft repeated promises in Revelation “to him who overcomes”. If you overcome your persecutors, Christ promises to give you “to eat from the tree of life” (2:7). You will “not be hurt by the second death” (2:11). He will “give some of the hidden manna to eat [and] a white stone, and on the stone a new name... (2:17). By the way, a white stone was used by a jury to declare someone not guilty. He promises to give you authority over the nations (2:26). You “shall be clothed in white garments, and [He] will not blot out [your] name from the Book of Life...” (3:5). The gives two other promises in chapter 3, and then near the end of the book, He promises that overcomers “shall inherit all things” (21:7). I would say all of that is worth whatever persecution we may face!

One promise that the tribulation saints should hold on to is the promise of Jesus in Mt. 24:22 that those days of persecution and tribulation will be shortened. The books of Revelation

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<sup>4</sup> Then in chapter 18, v.20 it says, “Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you holy apostles and prophets, for God has avenged you on her!” The context speaks of the fall and destruction of Babylon. Finally, Rev. 19:2 says, “For true and righteous are His judgments, because He has judged the great harlot who corrupted the earth with her fornication; and He has avenged on her the blood of His servants shed by her.”

(11:2; 12:6; 13:5) and Daniel (7:25; 9:24, 27) indicate that the Great Tribulation will be limited to 42 months. Praise God there *will* be a limit on how long God will permit this to go on. There is always an end to the rule of evil. One truth we should always remember about suffering is this: it is always temporary for the child God. 2 Corinthians 4:17 says, "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." In contrast, those who are not saved will face suffering that will never end.

Even history demonstrates the fact that evil tyrants do not build lasting kingdoms. You have heard of the fall of Hitler in Germany, of Idi Amin in Uganda, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and many others. Inherent in every system of tyranny and war are the seeds of their own destruction. No tyrant can endure but according to the permissive will of God. Then he is cut off by the judgment of God Almighty. By the way, I read that the worst of the German persecution and death camps against Jews lasted only about 7 years, from 1938-1945.

3. Trust in God's Comfort - God Himself will comfort those who suffer persecution. The last of chapter 7, v.17 says, "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." This promise is repeated in Rev. 21:4. If you are a mom, you no doubt have had the experience of having your child come to you in tears. And you remember wiping those tears away and giving a gentle kiss, followed by a loving hug. What comfort! And if we suffer for Jesus greatly, we can rightly expect to receive an even greater comfort from God some day. After all, He is called in 2 Cor. 1:3-4, the "...God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation..."

4. Trust in God's Provision - Let me show you one example of how God will provide for His people during this difficult time. Rev. 12:6 says, "Then the woman [Israel] fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, that they should feed her there one thousand two hundred and sixty days." That's 3 ½ years. If God will do that for believing Israelites, I believe He will do something similar for many other believers.

5. Use Persecution as an Opportunity to Bear Witness for Christ - In chapter 12, v.11 we see that the saints overcame Satan "by the word of their testimony," mainly about Jesus (cf. 1:2, 9; 12:17; 12:10) but also about how He changed their lives. Satan hates the testimony and witness of believers. Satan's greatest desire is to silence Christians. The world can try to doubt our intellectual arguments, but what can they do to refute the testimony of a changed life?

Think about the witness of the faith of Paul and Silas who, when they were beaten, thrust into the innermost dungeon, bound in stocks and in chains, prayed and sang praises to God. Who could stop men like that? What could be done with prisoners like that? Satan is afraid of Christians like that, because he will lose souls who hear the testimony of such men, just as he lost the Philippian jailer and his family.

We can also witness by our lives. Paul said in Romans 12:20-21, "Therefore 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

6. Heed Mt. 10:16, "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves." As we approach increased days of persecution, we need to be wise in how we use social media. We need to be wise and harmless in how we respond to persecution. Don't give the devil and his crowd an opportunity to accuse you regarding something that will not further the gospel, but only make unbelievers stumble.

Conclusion: Jesus said in John 9:4, "I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; *the night is coming when no one can work.*"<sup>5</sup> So let us finish the task of world evangelism while

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<sup>5</sup> This is another verse that questions a belief in widespread evangelism during the Tribulation period.

we still have the opportunity. Let us resolve to be victorious over any persecution we may face. Will you join me in these commitments?

Sources: Steve Felker (notes from his sermons on Mt. 24:1-14; Rev. 7:9-17; 12:1-17; 13:1-10; 17:1-18; 18:1-19:3); W. A. Criswell, *Expository Sermons on Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962-1966); George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972); Hal Lindsey, *There's a New World Coming* (Santa Ana, CA: Vision House Publishers, 1973); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 17 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); James Merritt (notes from his sermon on 7:1-17); John Philips, *Exploring Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1974); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 4:23] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2012); Jacob B. Smith, *A Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1961); John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1966); Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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