

The Church Triumphant Through Tribulation

Revelation 7:9–17

Studies in Revelation #17

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Describe for me the Christian life in one sentence. Are you thinking, “The Christian life is living out the grace of God?” Maybe, “The Christian life is the victory of God in the lives of his people.” Perhaps, “It’s a joyful, Spirit-filled life, and it’s the most satisfying life there is.” We’ve been bombarded and indoctrinated that Christianity is so great, so positive, and always so happy. I was browsing a book catalog a while back and saw titles such as “Fresh Encounter,” “Revival That Reforms,” “God’s Secret to Greatness,” “The Bondage Breaker,” and “Woman, Thou Art Loosed!”

As we move through the twenty-first century we live in the most religious nation ever to exist in the history of the world. Whether it’s family-centered Mormonism, self-centered New Age spirituality, or Air Supply styled worship in most churches, or New Atheism, everyone has a religion. And not surprisingly, they all teach a positive, happy, and successful life now.

But praise God we take the Word of God seriously in this church! Yes, Christianity is all about grace, and yes, God abundantly blesses us in this life, but our passage says something else: the church is triumphant in the life to come only after it has gone through tribulation in this life.

- 1. Our Present Tribulation***
- 2. Our Future Triumph***

Our Present Tribulation

John sees a vision here that teaches us about *our present tribulation*. At the beginning of verse 9 we read, **After this I looked**. After what? After what he heard in verses 1–8 about the 144,000. If you have an old New American Standard Bible you'll see that 7:4–8 is entitled, “A Remnant of Israel—144,000,” while 7:9–17 is called, “A Multitude From the Tribulation.” This follows what I described in my second sermon on Revelation in terms of the “futurist” approach to Revelation. This is the approach of some who see everything in Revelation 4–22 referring to the 7-year tribulation period, then the millennium, and finally the new heavens and new earth.

But as we saw last Lord's Day, the 144,000 are not a remnant of saved Jews in the so-called “end-times,” but they are a description of the whole church on earth. And Jesus reveals to John that the church is numbered like Israel was in its various census'. This is further evidenced because when John heard the number of the sealed in verses 1–8 as being 144,000, in verse 9 when he **looked** what did he actually see? He saw **a great multitude that no one could number**. The 144,00 is a symbol of the vastness of the saved. And where do these saved come from? Israel only? Again John sees people **from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages** (v. 9).

After writing about the worship of the church in verses 10–13, John has a dialog with **one of the elders**, whom we've already seen is an angel (v. 13). The

angels asks, **“Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?”** (v. 13) John replies, **“Sir, you know.”** Then the angel answers his own question: **“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”** (v. 14).

So John sees multitudes of people here in heaven who are **coming out of the great tribulation**, which is on earth. This means that the “great tribulation” is not some special time to come after the secret rapture, but it is a description of what Paul calls elsewhere “this present evil age” (Gal. 1:4). The church has been in the tribulation period since the coming of Jesus!

Don’t believe me, believe Jesus: “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Don’t believe me, believe Luke in the book of Acts, who said of Paul and Barnabus that they were “strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

Don’t believe me, believe Paul: “we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (Rom. 5:3-4); “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?” (Rom. 8:35).

Don't believe me, believe John here in Revelation: "I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus" (Rev. 1:9); "I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation" (Rev. 2:9–10).

Jesus calls you to adjust your expectations for this life based on this. Don't expect your best life now! Don't expect health and wealth! Don't expect to fit in, to get along, or to find the smooth road of life.

Our Future Triumph

John also sees a vision here that teaches us about *our future triumph*. Children, when I played basketball I was taught victory at all costs. That's another way of saying do everything you can get away with so that you can win. We were told, "If the ref doesn't see it, it's not a foul." We were told, "If you're cheating, you're not trying." And a lot of our culture lives this way. You will be tempted to live this way. It's all the world's way of getting us to think that this life is all there is and that we have to "get ours" before we go out. And sadly, many Christians think this way.

So how do we as Christians triumph in this life to overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil? Our text doesn't give us a list of "how tos," but it simply says that this great multitude in heaven who came out of the great tribulation on earth **washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb** (v. 14). Do you see the irony in this, brothers and sisters? The church in heaven is there because it dies down here in the great tribulation. But to die here at the hands of men is only a means to get us to presence of the Lamb, whose death for us is the means by which our sin-stained garments are washed and made white.

Our triumph in this life is a matter of faith; it's faith alone in the Lamb alone that gives us triumph; not in the eyes of the world, but in the eyes of God. By trusting in Christ's sacrifice for us it does not matter how the world sacrifices us! By bathing our filthy garments of self-righteousness in the Lamb's blood they become as white a snow. Despite being despised and stripped naked by the world we shall be clothed and welcomed by our God in heaven.

By faith now we come to realize our blessedness by sight when we enter the heavenly presence of God. Like those who have gone before us, we will be **before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple** (v. 15) by waving **palm branches...and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"** (vv. 9, 10) Why palm branches? This is an allusion to the ancient Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. 23:40). The palm branch reminded the children of Israel that their forefathers dwelt in temporary tents made of palm branches after the Exodus. But in God's heavenly

presence the true Israel from all nations remember their greater Exodus from the great tribulation and have a permanent, eternal dwelling with God.

By faith we come to realize that despite our being small and insignificant in the eyes of powerful of the world, we are an army that is innumerable. God once promised father Abraham many sons and daughters and through the worldwide church that promise of a family larger than the sand of the sea and the stars of the heavens is fulfilled! There are more of us than there are of them!

By faith we come to realize that God **will shelter us with his presence** (v. 15). By faith we come to realize that in that eternal city those who hungered in this life **shall hunger no more**, those who thirsted in this life will not **thirst anymore**, those who were exposed in this life will be exposed no more: **the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat** (v. 16). By faith we come to realize that the **Lamb...will be our shepherd and will guide them to springs of living water** (v. 17). By faith we come to realize that the curse on this world because of Adam's sin will come to end one day: **and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes** (v. 17).

How do you describe the Christian life, beloved? It's neither all tragedy nor all triumph. But there is tribulation now and there will be triumph to come, even as we place our faith in the suffering Lamb who experienced the subsequent glories of new life as the Lion. Amen.