

Revelation 7:9-17 – May 12, 2019

When was the last time you experienced a tribulation? “A tribuwhat?” Some of you may be asking. A tribulation. It's a word we don't use very often. You may not even know what it means.

And if you do, you may think it's just a fancy theological term that has to do only with the end of the world. And it couldn't possibly be something you've ever experienced in your lifetime. But you probably have. I think just about all of us have.

The word “tribulation” actually comes from a farming term. In Latin, to “tribulare” means to thresh grain. You see, when you grow a stalk of wheat, for example, the grains of wheat that you can grind up into flour have to be separated from the rest of the stalk.

And the best way to do that, without a piece of machinery at least, is to take the stalks of wheat and beat them against a stone over and over again until the seeds separate and fall to the ground. That is tribulare. That is a tribulation of wheat.

But this term came to be used for other purposes. Not for the tribulation of wheat, but for the tribulation of people. When a person experiences tribulation, it means they are being beaten against a hardship in their life, until they simply start to fall apart.

So I ask you again... when was the last time you experienced tribulation? When was the last time that this life beat you against a rock until you felt like you were falling apart?

Maybe it was a time of financial crisis. The loss of a job. An unexpected expense that stretched your finances to the limit. Maybe it was a time of personal crisis. An illness or an injury. A time of pain and suffering, when you just didn't know if you would make it through.

Maybe it was time of grief. The sudden death of a friend. The painful loss of a family member. Watching someone you love slip away before you.

Maybe it wasn't a specific event at all. Maybe it was a time of depression or stress or frustration. When life just felt like a brick wall that you were beating your head against. A sea of quicksand that was sucking you down.

That is a tribulation. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? We have all experienced tribulation. And we have all experienced the Great Tribulation.

That's a key message of St John's Revelation to us today. *“These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.”* What is the Great Tribulation and who is coming out of it? Well let's unpack that, shall we.

John sees a great multitude of people. A multitude too large to count. People from every nation on the planet. And they are all worshipping before the throne of heaven. Where God the Father sits. And where the Lamb of God who was slain, Jesus himself, also sits.

This great multitude is wearing pure white robes. And they are holding palm branches, like those who welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem. But they aren't shouting “hosanna” like those crowds. As I mentioned during my children's message a few weeks ago, hosanna means “save us, Lord.” It's a prayer. A plea. A desperate request. “Please, save us Lord!”

The crowd that came out to meet Jesus on Palm Sunday had no idea who he was or why he had come. They only knew that he had great power and great compassion. So they cried to him for help.

This crowd in front of John knows better. This crowd knows exactly who Jesus is. They know exactly what he has already done for them. And so, instead of crying “Hosanna! Save us!” as if it still needs to happen, they cry instead, *“Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”*

In other words, “We are here because you answered our prayer. You answered our hosanna. You've already saved us by sending Jesus to die on the cross. No one else did that. No one else could do that. Salvation belongs to you.”

But then one of the elders there, one of the saints of God who has been guiding John through this revelation, he asks John, “Do you know who these people are?” This great multitude in white. Standing before God. Declaring his salvation. Do you know who they are?

John doesn't know. And even after the elder explains it to him, I'm not sure how many of us know who they are. He tells John that they are *“the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”*

They have come out of the great tribulation. The great threshing of humanity. Now, this could be “great” because it's a one time event of great significance. Or it could be great because it is so lengthy, so expansive, that it pulls together a great number of smaller tribulations.

And as it turns out the answer is probably... both. Because the picture of the end times that Jesus gives us in Matthew 24, which he also calls a “great tribulation,” is not one of the world being all hunky dory until the very end and then... BOOM... everything descends into chaos.

No, the great tribulation that Jesus describes is one in which the world just steadily falls apart. In which Christians are threshed, beaten, shaken apart more and more, harder and harder, until they reach a point where they just can't take it anymore. And then Christ will finally return.

That is the great tribulation. That is what these saints before the throne have experienced. And that is what you and I experience everyday. And, unfortunately, what we will continue to experience. Because the great tribulation is the entire history of sinful humanity.

From the Garden of Eden to the day Christ returns, we are grain. Threshed against the rocks by sin, death, and the devil. Beaten by Satan and his demons. Beaten by the evil world around us. Beaten by our own sinful choices. Until we simply feel like we're falling apart, like wheat from the chafe.

This prophecy of the great tribulation is about us. But, it is not about us being defeated and destroyed by tribulation. It is about us coming out of the great tribulation. In victory.

For we are also those who have been washed clean by the blood of the Lamb. Washed clean by the Lamb who was slain on the cross of calvary. Washed until we are pure white. Baptized and reborn by the very Spirit of God. Free from the sin that causes all this suffering and tribulation.

We are washed until we are worthy to stand before the throne of God. Isaiah once saw that throne of God. It was surrounded by angels who covered their faces because they couldn't look upon God's glory. And yet, these saints who have come out of the great tribulation that John sees are worthy to stand there while angels bow down in humility.

We are washed until we are worthy to serve God day and night in his temple. When Moses and Aaron first created the priesthood it was made up of a select few. A handful of men from the tribe of Levi. Who had to be anointed with oil. And had to wear special robes. And had to constantly keep themselves clean. And who lived in constant fear that they would suffer God's wrath if they did something wrong.

But now, there are no select few from the tribe of Levi. There are a great multitude. Too numerous to count. And they are washed clean by the Lamb of God himself, so that they never need to fear God's wrath. And they are invited to serve day and night in his temple. Like no priest has ever been invited before.

Because in the ancient world, the job of a priest was to serve the god. The idol. The priest made sure the idol was kept safe. That it was sheltered in the temple. That it was fed with offerings of grain and meat and wine and the blood of animals.

But that's not how our God works. No, when you are baptized into his priesthood, he serves you. He shelters you with his presence. He feeds you with bread and wine, with his own flesh and blood. He protects you.

He is your good shepherd. Serving his sheep. Giving them whatever they need. Protecting them. Guiding them. Bringing them to springs of living water that well up to eternal life.

And ending our tribulation. Not just the little tribulations of our daily lives. No, he ends our great tribulation. The great tribulation that has been going on since Adam and Eve first disobeyed and were condemned to a life of suffering and the punishment of death.

He ends the sinfulness of this world. He makes it into a world where there are no more tears of pain or grief. So that when he wipes the tears away from your eyes, it will be for the very last time.

We live in a world of tribulation. We live in a time of great tribulation. But we have been washed clean by the very blood of the Lamb who brings us through tribulation. Who serves us. Who dies for us. And who wins the victory over this tribulation that we so desperately need. Amen.