

Every Tear, Revelation 7:9-17

Elgin, Nov. 13, 2016

Jonathan Wilson

Introduction

I love heaven. I love to imagine it. I love to talk about it. When a good friend and saint in Christ dies, like Nancy Franklin, I am comforted in the knowledge of where she is. The Bible makes two kinds of promises when it comes to heaven. One kind of promise, is about the things that will last forever and ever. The other kind of promise is about things that will never happen again. Today's text from Revelation offers both kinds of promises as it gives us a glimpse of heaven. Starting in verse 9 we see a multitude of saints whose souls are in the comforting care and joyous glory of God's presence, where every tear is wiped away. In the description of this multitude we hear some of God's forever promises, that his believers will dwell with God forever in a mutual relationship where God is glorified forever and the people are joyful forever. And then, just as important as the forever promises, are the Never again promises: Never again will the curse on Creation harm us so that we hunger, and thirst, and feel the sun in the sky is as much our killer as our life-giver; never again will we weep and mourn.

That is what I understand when I read this text, and to be honest, the reference to the Great Tribulation does not raise many questions for me. But the Great Tribulation has become a hinge doctrine for many interpreters whom many of you read and watch on t.v. or listen to on the radio. They have arguments with each other about who are these saints that John is seeing, and, what the "Great Tribulation" is. We have some Bible Study to do, but it all comes back to this: If you believe in Jesus Christ, then when you die, you are going to him, and you will never be separated from him again.

Let us pray: Lord God, open our minds and hearts to receive the promises of your word, and to be renewed in joy and hope, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

1. The Great Tribulation

The answer of the heavenly elder to John, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb,” has raised more questions in the minds of many readers. Those questions do not occur to John. He does not say, “Wait a minute! Before we keep going, can you explain to me, ‘What is the great tribulation?’” So the questions have occurred to later readers and interpreters of Revelation, and I find that to be a very significant piece of information.

The second piece of information that I find very significant is that the believers in the seven churches of Asia understood that Revelation was being written to them. In chapters two and three, each of the churches had been alternately praised for their deeds that proceeded from faith, and warned about being seduced by worldly values. Those seven letters function as what you and I would call cover memos, or, a better way to think of it, the preface to a book. The book from chapter 4 on is the main thing, which will have lessons for the readers in chapters 2 and 3 who will be encouraged to better as witnesses to their faith in Jesus Christ. What Revelation describes is going to either encourage or warn Christians living at the end of the First Century, and as it encourages or warns them, so it encourages and warns every following generation to the present.

The third piece of significant information is that the Great Tribulation may very well be identified by the promises of forever and never again that are fulfilled by those who have endured it. If the blessedness of this great multitude is the opposite of what they had suffered, this gives us an idea of what happens in the Great Tribulation:

Verse 15 tells us that these saints are forever before the throne of God and forever serve him. This is kingdom language, the language of sovereignty. Never again will they be pressured to serve worldly powers and governments under whom they suffered in the Great Tribulation; they will serve the lawful King of Heaven and Earth.

The second promise is that they are in his temple, and he spreads his tabernacle over them. They are forever fulfilled and complete in their religion; never again will they feel the pressure of false faith as they did in the Great Tribulation.

The third promise is that never again will they hunger, thirst, or feel the harmful effects of the sun, because the eternal Lamb is their eternal shepherd who is constantly, eternally renewing their lives. Never again will they suffer from the curse of death and the groaning of creation as they had suffered during the Great Tribulation.

This great multitude has suffered the Great Tribulation, where they have suffered the curse of death and the alienation of creation itself where even the sun in the sky can kill; they have suffered from the pressure to accept the claims of false faiths, false religions, and false idols; they have suffered the pressure of governments trying to usurp authority over one's conscience and ethics, is the soul, which only God can claim.

Has such Great Tribulation ever happened in the world? Only in every generation since the first one going back 19 centuries. The first readers were encouraged by this vision because John was seeing their own friends, people who had suffered hunger and thirst and the heat of the day, who had experienced the pressure to bow to idols as John wrote about in the cover memos, and the pressure to sell one's soul to the glory of Rome, as John wrote about in the cover memos.

Great Tribulation has happened in the generations since. My ancestors experienced Great Tribulation in terrors on their conscience from an English government that demanded religious

conformity to their Anglican system. They came to America, starting in the seventeenth century, and then my Quaker ancestors experienced Great Tribulations at the hands of my Puritan ancestors. The Evangelical Covenant Church traces a spiritual ancestry to Moravian missionaries. The Moravians were frequently persecuted because their religious convictions kept them pacifist during warfare, including the American Revolution. The Moravians had to pay special taxes and penalties because they refused to turn out for the militia. Compare that to the hue and cry, the fuss and the feather, we make today when Christians are fined for exercising our faith.

South Sudan. China. North Korea. The Muslim World. More Christians have died for their faith since 1900 than in all previous centuries combined. Some insist that the Bible describes a seven year period where things get really really bad, called the Great Tribulation, and then the argument is over when and where Christians are in the midst of that. I respect that. There has been a lot of investment into that point of view. I hope that you can respect my point of view too, that things cannot get much worse than the politics of starvation genocide on Africa's east coast. There may be a final surge of violence against believers before Jesus returns, but the point to be understood as each generation reads Revelation, is that life is hard, and being a witness to Jesus is hard, and the reward is glory.

2. Never Again

These saints have come through the Great Tribulation by washing their robes in the blood of the Lamb. Some interpreters see this as martyrdom, that by shedding their own blood they share in the testimony of the cross of Christ. What I see here is that this company certainly includes martyrs, but the point is not that the believers have shed their blood. Our blood is poison. We are all under the curse of sin, all of us must die anyway. What is important is they

have expressed their faith that the Lamb's blood covers and protects them. Now in heaven, never again will they need to fear that they might fall into sin.

The white robes, we learn elsewhere in John, is the outward witness of deeds of faith. Holiness is active, leading to righteous acts that testify to the character of God, because the Holy Spirit that inhabits believers is powerful and alive. So these believers have been purified by the blood of the lamb, and by God's Spirit they have put on the garments of holiness. Now they are perfect. Perfection is not possible in our cursed bodies that carry around our old natures, but we look forward to the perfection of our holiness, where never again do we sin or even find sin to be thinkable.

This vision describes the great company of the redeemed coming from every tribe, language, people and nation. Never again will there be ethnic strife; never again will people divide themselves by skin color or dialect or national border. John's vision of heaven is of the restoration of every diversity of humanity gathered together to fully disclose the image and glory of God, for it is only when every shade of complexion and every contour of language and culture is gathered together, that the image of God is most complete. Later this company of the redeemed, this vast multitude beyond counting, will inhabit the New Jerusalem in the bodies of the resurrection, and the perfection of holiness in God's image will be complete.

Someone said to me, then there must be crying in heaven, since God wipes away our tears. I understand what they mean, but I am not sure that I agree. Or put another way, if there are tears it happens right away, and then those tears, wiped away, never come back. If there might be tears in our first moments in the presence of Jesus, it may be because that we in our striving and discipleship and struggle with the flesh had forgotten that we are really children in the sight of God. Our consciences are so primed that we begin to think of ourselves maybe as a

little too important to God's plan, so if we mess up we feel like guilty wrecks. Where the godless have seared their consciences to make them numb, those who have been awakened to the grace of God sometimes can really crumble spiritually and emotionally when we become aware of our failures.

So it may be that when I meet the LORD face to face and become aware of all my wrongs and worthless pursuits compared to God's mercy, grace, holiness, and innocence, that I will be so overwhelmed that I will fall apart in grief for my shame and regret and guilt. That is when God will wipe away my tears with his own finger, that is when Christ will cup my chin in his hand and lift my face to meet his eyes, and smile upon me with peace and kindness and warmth. And I will realize that I am a child in his sight.

Imagine that a child drops a bowl of tomato soup all over the carpet. The child who says, "yippee" and jumps around in the puddle of soup, making everything worse, needs to be dealt with in a different way from the child who spills the soup and then emotionally falls apart in regret, shame, guilt, and terror of parent's disapproval. The child's shame comes from having wanted to prove how grown-up they were, and that adds to feeling bad about the mess and the fear of how parents will respond. The forgiveness of God is as the love of a parent, who knows that no child can ever deal with that stain, and yet loves, and forgives without condition, and reassures, and consoles. All of us are children to God and soup-spillers. All of us have made a stain we cannot clean on our own. To those who don't think that matters, God our Father will have to deal with them. But to those who know that this matters, and repent, we will find ourselves in God's hands having our tears wiped away as a child's by a loving, forgiving Fathers. And after that moment I am convinced that in heaven I will never weep again.

Conclusion

In his vision John sees the reward that will come on those believers who persevere in the Great Tribulation, those believers who have been through government pressure on their conscience and resisted selling their souls; who have felt the peer pressure and economic pressure to syncretize false religion into their doctrine, and have remained true to the claims of Jesus Christ; who endure the curse of flesh in their appetites and the groaning of creation and put holiness first. All of this may become more intense before Jesus returns; it is also true that these things have all been plenty intense for believers in every generation from the first century to the present. The world is full of troubles, but take heart, Jesus has overcome. We can look to the past and the future to be encouraged by the saints who have persevered, and to persevere ourselves.

Then we will never again hunger or thirst or feel the harmful effects of the sun's radiation. For we will be in that multitude beyond number, from every tribe and language and people and nation, gathered to the Tabernacle of God, where the spring of living water is Jesus Christ himself. "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." Amen.