

Trouble Today & Trouble Tomorrow

Revelation Chapters 6 & 7

We are going to get to Revelation Chapter 6 in a *moment*, and we're going to have a real sobering talk today about tribulation, trouble. But first, I want you to hear one of Jesus' classic statements about it. This is what he says, ***"In this world, you will have tribulation. But be of good cheer for I have overcome the world."*** John 16:33

Having a firm grip on these words is important for your health and well being. Sometimes people are tempted to think being a Christian means my life should be pleasant and smooth as long as I'm faithful and obedient. My financial life should be secure. My health should be great. My hair should be thick until I'm at least 80 or so. My boss should see my radiant, devout work ethic and constantly look for ways to promote me and increase my salary. My children should be so grateful that they seek to find ways to express their appreciation. But to all who are tempted to hold such views, Jesus has a word, ***"In this world you will have tribulation,*** -- suffering, trouble, disappointment, pain.

In Matthew 6:34 Jesus says, ***"Don't worry about tomorrow."*** Why not? Because it's going to be real smooth sailing? He says, ***"Don't worry about tomorrow for tomorrow will bring worries enough of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."*** There's going to be trouble today, He says. And there's going to be trouble tomorrow.

This is a prediction that has 100 percent certainty. You know how weather-forecasters predict the weather, but they're not always 100 percent accurate. That happens in forecasting weather when human beings do it. But Jesus never misses. And this is His forecast: trouble today, trouble tomorrow." That's the forecast. (Just turn to the person next to you and say, "Trouble today, trouble tomorrow.") That's his forecast.

Everybody here and everybody listening/ watching this now and later knows about tribulation -- maybe large ways, maybe small ways, sadness or loss, being estranged from someone you love, your health deteriorates, you lose your job, your finances crash. Jesus says, "In this world, you'll have tribulation. Count on it." **But** that's only half the story. Jesus says, "*In this world you will face trouble, but take heart, **BUT** be courageous! Face tribulation with splendid defiance! *for I have overcome the world.*"*"

Today, what's most troubling you? Guilt? Jesus took it on Himself to the cross. The future? Jesus holds it effortlessly in the palm of His nail scarred hand. Loneliness? Jesus promises intimacy with you that will last forever. Inadequacy? Jesus promises His Spirit will empower you to do anything He asks you to do. Disappointment? God will heal your heart.

Now, this is to be the pattern, the template, for every Christ-follower. This is how we are to understand trouble: "*In this world you will have tribulation,*" but don't be defeated by it. Be courageous, "*for I have overcome the world.*" - We are given VICTORY because of Jesus' victory on the cross and the open tomb.

We're going to look at two chapters in Revelation that are quite complex. But one central truth is real clear, and I think we could summarize the whole book of Revelation with this one statement from Jesus: "*In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, [be courageous], I have overcome the world.*"

Now, Revelation 6 begins the opening of the seven seals. This is the first of a series of sevens in Revelation. The sevens will repeat several times. The 7 seals will be followed by seven trumpets, seven angels with seven plagues, and seven bowls of God's wrath. All of these series of sevens are slightly different ways to describe the same thing -- the judgment of God. Ancient eastern people would repeat something important over and over as a way to get the message across.

A cardinal principle of good Bible interpretation, is that we start by asking what problem or occasion prompted the author to write? What does the author intend for his readers to understand. Eugene

Peterson writes that there were questions rolling around in the minds of John's readers.

"They're wondering, if the kingdom of God has been announced by Christ, what are all these Roman armies doing here?"

"If the Gospel declared God's love for the world, why are people proclaiming it being put in prisons or on crosses? Why is it that Jesus lived, suffered, died and rose again, and the world is getting worse?"

Someone once said, "The chief theological question of all time is: **What in the Sam Hill is going on around here anyway?**" That's the question in the minds of John's readers – "What in the *world* is going on?" Why is the church suffering like this? And that's what John is trying to address. John's trying to tell people what's going on in this world.

Revelation chapter 6 begins with what are sometimes called the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. *"I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, 'Come!' I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.*

"When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, 'Come!' Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword.

"When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, 'Come!' I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, 'A quart of wheat for a day's wages, and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!'

"When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, 'Come!' I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth."

The first one, with a bow and a crown on a white horse probably represents political domination -- power. John's readers would have thought about governments -- like the Romans -- that were seeking to dominate the whole earth, and that were persecuting and killing Christ-followers in those days.

The second horse is colored red, and it represents war, violence, and bloodshed.

Then the third horseman comes with a pair of scales in his hand. This refers to such a high rate of inflation that often follows war, that famine sets in. This horseman pictures famine, poverty, hunger, and need. But the oil and wine are plentiful. So there is famine, even in a time of plenty. And that's true today. We produce enough food to feed every person on earth, yet 25,000 people die from hunger each day.

Then the fourth horse, and this one pictures death and disease. Notice it is limited to a fourth of the earth. By this John intends for us to understand that God is limiting the damage these evil forces can do. But it's devastating.

These four horsemen ride between nations. More people have been killed in the last 100 yrs., than in any previous century – millions in Communist Russia, 60 million in World War 2, millions more at the hands of the Khmer Rouge, and in Darfur, 63 million killed in our own country from abortion.

These horsemen rode, in the last few years, in the last few years in emergency rooms and hospital ICU's and nursing homes where over 6 million people in the world died from covid19. These horsemen ride wherever innocent children get shot in schools and on inner-city streets. They ride in the suburbs in homes where husbands and wives are torn apart by conflict. They ride wherever little children live in hunger, or fear, or abandonment, or neglect.

And here's what's going on: They seem to be riding roughshod over the church, over God's beloved people. This seems inexplicable!! How can this be??!

"When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They

called out in a loud voice, 'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?'" "How long?" they cry out.

"Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed."

John tells us, *"... the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained ... called out in a loud voice, 'How long, Sovereign Lord ...?'"* This is the voice of an anguished church. God's beloved people who have been murdered – not for any crime – but murdered for their unwavering commitment to Jesus whom they love. To John's readers, these words brought to mind *real* people. People they *knew*. It is clearly documented that Christ followers of that day were thrown to lions in coliseums. Some were burned at the stake. Some were wrapped in skins of wild animals and fed to wild dogs. Some were dipped in tar and used as human torches to light walkways. This was going on with *real* people, dying for their faith in Christ.

This happens TODAY. Last month in Nigeria 50 people were shot dead as they worshipped in church on Sunday morning. More people have been killed for their faith in Jesus in the last 100 yrs., than in ***all the previous centuries COMBINED!***

And so the Church cries out, "God, how can this be? God, what's going on? God, do something!" And John writes to the survivors, to the brothers and sisters of Christ-followers who were killed for their faith, some of whom will undergo the *same* fate for *their* faith.

¹² *When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood,* ¹³ *and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale.* ¹⁴ *The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.* ¹⁵ *Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains,* ¹⁶ *calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb,* ¹⁷ *for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"* Revelation 6: 12-17

When the next – the 6th – seal is opened, it is a picture of the wrath and judgment of God poured out on ALL people – kings and slaves, rich and poor. This is the end of the world. God's judgement is so complete that the question being asked is, ***"Who can stand?"***

We find out who can stand in chapter seven. This is a picture of the suffering church. John writes:

"Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: 'Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.' The angels are held back. There is a limitation of damage now.

John goes on, ***"Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel."***

⁵ 12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed,

12,000 from the tribe of Reuben,

12,000 from the tribe of Gad,

⁶ 12,000 from the tribe of Asher,

12,000 from the tribe of Naphtali,

12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh,

⁷ 12,000 from the tribe of Simeon,

12,000 from the tribe of Levi,

12,000 from the tribe of Issachar,

⁸ 12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun,

12,000 from the tribe of Joseph,

12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed. Revelation 7: 1-8

Some people today see in this seal on the forehead a barcode permanently affixed on one's forehead, kind of like a permanent Social Security number or credit card magnetic strip so that the government knows your every move.

But why would John write about barcodes? That would be unintelligible to the people he is writing to – people he loves, people he wants so much to encourage, and not confuse. ! It is not good Biblical interpretation to take passages of Scripture and yank them out of their context, and explain them in terms that could only be understood today – 2000 years later.

In those days, a king would use his signet's ring to seal an official document. It would be a way of saying, "This is royal property. You don't touch this." The Bible says, "*And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.*" Ephesians 1:13 One way you are given the Holy Spirit is in your baptism. So we talk about being marked, or sealed, with the cross on your forehead in your baptism. This all is to reassure you: "YOU are sealed, that is, God claims you as HIS property!"

Then John mentions 144,000. Many Bible scholars -- and our church is in this camp-- believe that the number 144,000 is *symbolic*. We do not believe that only 144,000 people will make it to heaven.

Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, take this number literally, and they believe that it's them. But by 1935 they used up all 144,000 spots in heaven with Jehovah's Witnesses. Now what do they do? So they then proposed a paradise on earth for any late-comers.

We do NOT take this number *literally*, partly because tribal identity was gone by John's day. Tribes in the nation of Israel had been conquered and removed and lost.

We've seen how 12 is often associated with the fullness of the people of God -- the 12 tribes of Israel, the 12 apostles. 144 This is $12 \times 12 = 144$. 1000 is $10 \times 10 \times 10$. Ten (a complete number) cubed (for Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). A Bible scholar named Bruce Metzger puts it like this, "**The explicit number 144,000 is John's way of symbolizing the completeness of the people of God. Not one of the redeemed is missing, not one.**" This is a way of God saying, "Every one of my children is precious to Me."

In my family when our kids were little and we would go on vacation, we'd count to be sure we had all 3. We didn't come back and say, "You know, when we left we had three kids. We came back with two kids, but at least we've got *most* of them. We counted. We wanted every one.

God counts! God cares! Whatever you're suffering, nothing can separate you from Him -- not persecution, not disaster, not illness, not death." "God wants YOU! He wants every one!"

Then comes a second vision. ***"After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:***

"Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.' All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders, and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, 'Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!'"

This is also a picture of the church, of God's people. First we saw them suffering on earth. Now *this* picture shows them triumphant in heaven. They've got white robes which were often worn as a sign of victory. Palm branches were often waved as a sign of victory.

Verse 13: ***"Then one of the elders asked me, 'These in white robes -- who are they, and where did they come from?' I answered, 'Sir, you know.'" It's a safe response for John to give. "And he said, '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.'"***

Now, there are 2 views about this phrase: the great tribulation.

The first view is that the Great Tribulation refers to a specific period at the end of time. It's often thought to be a seven-year period. It's believed that the Great Tribulation will be a time of great suffering and pain when evil is unleashed. And the Church (believers in Christ) will be raptured or removed from the earth before the time of tribulation begins. That's one view of the Great Tribulation.

A second view (and this is my view and the view of our church body) is that the Great Tribulation is not just to one particular time of tribulation, but all of time on this earth. It's a fact that the Church generally *has* faced, and *will* face tribulation. For 2000 years, in every generation, followers of Jesus Christ have, and will, face persecution for their faith.

It was going on in St. Paul's day. After Paul had been beaten and stoned and left for dead, the believer's encouraged one another by saying, ***"It is through many persecutions or great tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of God."*** Acts 14:22

It is going on even in our day. There are places in the world, where coming to a worship service would be **unthinkable** – it would be signing your death warrant. In 60 countries around the world 200 million of our brothers and sisters are harassed, abused, arrested, tortured or executed specifically because of their faith.

Friends never forget (never forget) that this Church that we are a part of – that we seek to build – is about nothing less than life and death! It is not a game. It is not a pass-time, or an activity to get added onto everything else. It is something for which hundreds, and thousands, and millions of people who have come before you and I have suffered and bled and given their lives for.

Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice for you. He endured the pain of the cross to win your forgiveness. He promises you, ***“In this world you will have trouble, BUT TAKE HEART, for I have overcome the world.”***

What is it that you’re going through? Maybe your heart is aching because you’re alone, or you’re estranged from one of your children. You may have gotten bad news from your doctor. You’re in desperate financial need, or you’ve got a problem, and you can’t see the solution.

Never forget this – NEVER forget that you are part of band of human beings who for 2000 years have overcome. And they overcome in prisons, and they overcome in deserts, and they overcome in hospital rooms, and they overcome in the darkest night, and they overcome in the face of death itself. And one day they will overcome FOR ALL ETERNITY!! This is God’s gift to you – because of Jesus’ suffering, and dying, and rising for you. This is undeserved – but a gift of pure grace to you. And because of Jesus, one day suffering, and pain, and death, and tears will be no more.

And for that day there is this wonderful promise: ***“They are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst.***

“The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” Amen.