

Out of the Great Tribulation

In the name of the Lamb whose blood washes clean the white robes of the saints, dear friends in Christ: I wonder if any of you have ever done this: you're sitting there reading a really good book. You're engrossed in it. And there is a character (maybe more than one) that you find particularly appealing – you find yourself relating to them, almost like you're in their shoes. And then comes a crisis in the storyline. Terrible things are happening to your character. You can't see how they can possibly survive. You want to go reading; but you're worried about what you're going to find out. You don't want to be disappointed. Losing that character would almost like be losing a friend. You need some assurance. So what do you do? You turn to the last few pages of the book and sneak a peek at the end. There you find your character alive and well. He or she is doing just fine. And then, with a sense of relief, you can turn back to where you left off confident that somehow or another your character is going to make it through. Have you ever done that? Or perhaps, for those of you who are not big readers, have you ever done that with a video you were watching?

If so, or even if you can imagine doing that, you'll be able to appreciate what's going on in today's first reading from the Book of Revelation. Contrary to what a lot of self-proclaimed prophecy experts say, the Revelation of St. John is a book of comfort for the persecuted church. In it the Lord Jesus shows John (and through John's witness he shows all who read the Apostle's vision) how it is that despite peril and hardship and all sorts of calamities, the Lord is still caring for his own, leading them through the valley of death's shadow, protecting them from their enemies, and bringing them safely at last to the final goal.

And that's what we have in the reading we heard: it's a sneak peek at the last page of the book of God's love for his people. A vast multitude of white robed saints from every nation and race are standing around the throne of God and of the Lamb (who is Jesus, of course). They are waving palm branches and praising the Lord for their salvation. And when the question is asked, "Who are they?" the answer is given: "They are the ones coming out of the great tribulation", which mean they have suffered horribly. In their lives they've known immense sorrow, adversity, difficulty, and loss – they've been pulled through life's knotholes – and yet here they are, all safe and sound and full of joy, wearing the white robes of righteousness earned for them by the Lord Jesus whose blood shed on Calvary's cross washed away all their sins.

But can we be more specific about who they are? Sure we can. They are the very the people who first read the book of Revelation – the ones who were suffering under Roman persecution at the time John wrote. But they are more than that. They are also the Old Testament saints who lived and died trusting in the Messiah who was to come and redeem Israel. They are also the saints who were yet to be born from every nation and time in history who would live and die trusting in the Lord Jesus. They are, in that sense, you and me. Yes, if you are a believer in the Lord Jesus, if you trust that by his shed blood your sins are forgiven, then John saw *you* standing in that multitude. And that means you know how your story ends – which means that you can turn back to wherever your story is now and to whatever crisis or hardship you are facing (or are yet to face) in perfect confidence that the Lord is going to carry you safely through it. In the end, despite what you may have to endure now, not a hair of your head will be harmed. And one day you will be praising the Lord in ecstatic joy and thanking him with a grateful heart. All the tears you shed in this age will be wiped away forever.

Now there's no other way to say it: that's just good news. And knowing what's coming and seeing yourself there at the finish line really can help you take courage and stand firm in the faith when facing the difficult trials that come your way. But what it doesn't do is answer the question *why*? If God is good, and he is; and if he loves us so very much, and he does; then why do we have to go through great tribulations at all? Why doesn't he protect his people from them and make our path easy? Or, since we know where we're going to end up anyway, why can't we simply skip to the last chapter and avoid all the pain and heartbreak we have to endure on the way?

Is it that the Lord gets some kind of twisted pleasure in causing his saints to suffer? And if so, what kind of warped being would do that? Obviously the Lord must have another purpose in mind. But what is it?

In response, it needs to be said up front that any time you ask, "Why did God?" or "Why does God?" at very best, the answer you get back is going to be incomplete. God's ways are not ours. His knowledge and wisdom far exceed our own. Even if we had a full explanation, we wouldn't be able to understand it. But allowing that, we can give a partial answer to the question, *why*?

It's this: the suffering of God's people serves the Lord's greater purposes. It is part of process by which the Lord is shaping us and remaking us in the image of Christ. It may surprise you, but even Jesus himself was shaped by the process. The inspired writer of Hebrews says that Christ was made perfect through his submission and his suffering (Hebrews 5:8-9). And you may think, "Wait, wasn't he perfect already?" Well, if by perfect you mean flawless or sinless, yes he was perfect; but the word *perfect* also carries the idea of *completeness*. And there was a sense in which Christ was not complete. Namely, it was in his love.

What? Christ's love was not complete? You'd better explain that, Pastor. Okay, listen: The Father loves the Son by giving himself. That is to say he takes his divine essence, whatever that spiritual substance is that makes God God, and he gives it up – he hands it over – he surrenders it, all of it, so that the Son is. That's why the Father is the Father and the Son is the Son, and why we say that the Son is *begotten* of the Father. And it's an eternal process. The Father is always giving himself for the Son. In this way they are two persons sharing the same divine essence forever. That's how the Father loves the Son: by giving himself. In return, the Son loves the Father by surrendering his will. I mean, he can't give his essence back to the Father – that would make him the Father, and that wouldn't make any sense at all; so instead he loves his Father by submitting his will to him.

And it is the Father's will that the Son's love be made complete by him giving himself in the same way that the Father does. And since he can't give himself for the Father, he gives himself for the Father's creation. That's what happened on the cross when the Son gave himself, his body, his spirit, his life, his all to save us: we who are undeserving sinners and rebels against God. Thus he displayed perfect love – the same kind of love his Father has for him. His love was made perfect and complete through his suffering great tribulation.

And so it is also for us who have been called by Jesus to take up our crosses and follow him. We too are being made perfect by suffering great tribulations. And this is evident by Jesus' words in today's Gospel, which is the beginning of the famed Sermon on the Mount. Who are blessed? Why, it's the ones who are suffering. They've been knocked down off their mountains of pride. They've been humbled, and so they are poor in spirit. They've suffered loss. That's why they are mourning. They are hungry and thirsting for righteousness. They

know they haven't got any of their own. They've been persecuted for righteousness' sake, which means they are suffering unjustly, even as Jesus did. And they are being lied about and assaulted and treated maliciously because of their faith in Christ. And all of that is working together to help make them like Christ. Thus they are blessed.

Maybe this analogy will help. The school theme at CLS this year is a musical one. It's "Many notes, one song." The idea is that each child of God is like a note in the Lord's grand symphony – the song of our salvation. We each have a role, a part to play, in the greater whole. And as I was explaining to the students a few weeks back, with a stringed instrument, anyway, the only way to play the notes and make the music is to disturb the string somehow. For a piano or a hammered dulcimer, you've got to strike it. With a guitar or banjo, you have to pick at it, for a violin or a cello, you've got to scrape it with a bow. Thus it is by being *afflicted* that the string makes the note the musician wants to play.

And so it is with us. Think of what love is – the perfect kind of love that the Lord wants to instill in us. Think about what we call Christian virtues. And ask yourself these questions: How can you learn patience if you never have to wait for anything? How can you learn the virtue of forgiveness if no one ever sins against you? How can you learn to treasure justice if you've never experienced injustice? How can you practice love for your enemies if you haven't got any? How can you learn compassion for those who suffer if you've never suffered? How can you learn the infinite value of life if you've never mourned the passing of a loved one? How can you know the value of loyalty if you've never been betrayed? How can you have persevering faith in what God has promised if you never have to exercise faith because you always have everything you want and need?

You can't. And that's the whole point. It's through tribulation, yes, through great tribulation at times, that the Lord is working in us through the power of his Holy Spirit and our trust in Christ to bring us into tune; into tune so that when we are struck or picked or scraped we will make the right note in the Lord's grand symphony of salvation.

It's a beautiful song; one that we are only learning to play now. But it will be absolutely perfect when we have all been brought out of the great tribulation and we gather around the throne of God and of the Lamb to sing his praise and our eternal thanksgiving. May the Lord complete this work in us and all his saints. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!