

UNDERSTANDING THE GREAT TRIBULATION

By looking at the *symbolism across the Bible*, and referring to some of the best Bible scholars, we began our journey through Revelation with a premise that may have been somewhat new to you: the time of testing that we know as “The Tribulation”, is not three sets of events (i.e. the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven bowls) as a long chain of events, but rather, one period of tribulation from three different perspectives; three different angles.

The *seven seals* highlighted the hell man unleashes on man; the *seven trumpets* highlighted the role of Satan, and the *seven bowls* are from God’s perspective in judgment. Each is a layer on the same great time of tribulation.

It’s important for us to remember that *there is really nothing new in Revelation*, it’s just the scope of it. It involves the same human nature, the same social tendencies, and spiritual principles that are in play *right now*. The only difference is the magnitude and finality of the great tribulation. For us, that means, it isn’t a case of waiting until the end of days, everything is in play right now. What we learn from the vision is crucial, right now!

So what has Revelation taught us so far? It speaks more of *patience and endurance* than *victory in the moment*. There is great emphasis on *enduring and trusting* and not so much about *immediate comfort*. There is a lot about the spiritual war that is raging in the background, and how that is really setting up what’s happening in our physical world. It’s something we just don’t see until we step back a little from the daily grind and look at the big picture; of our day, and over history.

In chapter 14 we learned that every one carries a mark; it’s either the mark of the *beast*, or the mark of the *Lamb*. The beast is the system of the world that is set by our fallen nature; the mark is the one’s worldview, values, reasoning, mindset, and they way we do life based on that. It goes deeper than what you do, but the nature in which you do it.

You know, *Kid’s Camp is perhaps the most profound microcosm* of the human condition that I experience all year! Example: Sarah is teaching a very clear lesson on the goal of reaching heaven. I believe it was grade 3, and the kids are asking seminary level questions about the existence and nature of God.

After the lesson, we follow up with the camp’s all-time favorite game we call, “El Diablo.” It’s kind of like sharks and minnows. The goal is to reach “heaven”, the line on the far side without being tagged by El Diablo. It’s Revelation on a children’s play ground. And right after this very clear lesson on God’s nature and reaching heaven; guess how long it takes before the kids started bending the rules of the game! It was very natural for them to try and cheat their way to “heaven.” –And we thought, wow; that’s kind of scary; that is the spiritual nature of mankind, summed up on a little play area with third-graders. Even the *youngest* of us carry a mark. Scripture tells us; 666 is, quite simply, the *number of man*. Mark of the beast, yes, but the number of man.

THE BIG QUESTION THIS MORNING

This evening we’ll go into a more verse-by-verse expository, of the seven bowls in chapters 15 and 16; but this morning, let’s focus down to just *one question* from these chapters.

You see, we’ve already seen the symbol of bowls in this vision. They reflect the image of the bowl of incense on the altar, and that brings *two important images to bear*.

1. One is the *power of prayer*, much of what happens in Revelation revolves around the prayers of the saints. The prayers of the true believers is the incense of God. There is tremendous power in righteous prayers.

- The second thing the bowls represent is ***perfect purity and holiness, and perfect justice***. The bowls pour out plagues. The bowls set the perfect standard, and then the bowls are the mechanism by which the standard is carried out.

A big emphasis on the bowls of God's wrath; is that every misfortune is perfectly deserved, it is perfectly fair. It is in fact, the bowls are really the consequences of humanity's own sin pouring back on us. It is God's final word on this world.

We are now in the third "layer" or angle of this great tribulation and nowhere have I seen yet, God's people spared from the times. And even if we entertain the idea of a ***pretribulation rapture***, the reality still remains; all of these challenges are in play right now. It is the challenge for everyone right now. The big question is: **HOW DO WE MAKE IT THROUGH?**

The emphasis of Revelation to God's people is staying the course, not growing cold, or corrupted, or shipwrecking their faith, or just plain; becoming dead. How do we make it through, collectively as the church body, as well as personally?

TWO RESPONSES: CURSE OR PRAISE

The word "plagues" used in these chapters, isn't speaking of disease as much as the more general idea of misfortune. All the spiritual truths are against this backdrop of final and global misfortune, metered out by a perfectly just God.

And the chapters emphasize that all of ***mankind responds*** to God's perfect justice is one of two ways:

- They do not repent, and ***curse*** Him at every judgment
- They are in tune with God, they ***sing a song of victory***, which is His victory by the way, not ours, and they are blessed.

This is important to note because the Greek word for ***"plague" (play-gay) here is misfortune***, and the word for ***bless (makarios) is in fact "fortunate."*** So there are two great opposites in experience and response. Here is the song of those staying the course. It is a song of victory that brings the Old and New Testaments into perfect harmony. It goes like this:

Revelation 15:3-4

"Great and marvelous are your deeds,
 Lord God Almighty.
 Just and true are your ways,
 King of the nations.
 Who will not fear you, Lord,
 and bring glory to your name?
 For you alone are holy.
 All nations will come
 and worship before you,
 for your ***righteous acts*** have been revealed."

Chapter 16 really gives the impression that the die is cast. Now is the time to choose our side.

So just who will be singing the victory song?

After looking at the letters to the seven churches, I don't believe it will be those with a casual or comfortable practice of Christ. It's not going to be everyone with a loose agreement with God. Chapter 16 speaks of a world that is divided and at war with itself. In fact, the only thing that it shares in common is its hatred of God. As it gathers for war, God says this:

Revelation 16:15

“Look, I come like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake and remains clothed, so as not to go naked and be shamefully exposed.”

THE MEANING OF “AWAKE” & “CLOTHED”

There's the answer; who is “blessed”? -Those who do two things; STAY AWAKE, and “REMAIN CLOTHED.” But what does that mean? It obviously doesn't mean you have to stay awake physically until Jesus returns. It doesn't mean you've got to start taking showers with your clothes on. So, where in Scripture has this imagery already been used, and what did it mean there?

AWAKE

Let's start with the image of being asleep:

Rev 3

3¹⁻³ “Write this to the angel of the Church in Sardis: ‘These are the words of him who holds in his hand the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: I know what you have done, that you have a reputation for being alive, but that in fact you are dead. Now wake up! Strengthen what you still have before it dies!’

Being asleep means being dead. The New Testament uses this imagery for both physical and spiritual life. -For Sardis, being dead meant losing their “lampstand” which meant losing the fire and presence of Christ. Laodicea was in this situation as well, and didn't even realize they were on the brink of death!

This is a very disturbing because; it is possible to think you or your church family are alive when you are actually dead. How do you know if you are “dead”? -It's really straight-forward; you have stopped transforming. You're religious, but there is no fruit. You are an institution, but no working spiritual gifts. You carry about your religious establishment, but not the command of Christ. “If you love me you will keep my command.”

The good news here is, it's possible to reverse course. We are told to “wake up”, so what does that mean?

1 Thessalonians 5: 6 says- **let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober.**

Just like English, “sober” means not getting drunk. People do the most indiscreet things when they're drunk. You say the wrong things and really regret it later. You do the wrong things, and in fact, you cannot do the right things. Drink enough and you can't even walk. And drink enough and you fall asleep, usually in a very undignified way. (At which point, you're so-called friends post you on Facebook and you never live it down!)

It's not surprising that the figurative meaning is based on the same idea. There is intentionality to staying in step with God. It takes a mind and heart connection that needs to be maintained. Some of that must be done in our private time, and some must be done collectively. When we don't do this; when we slack off, a strange thing happens: spiritually, we fall asleep. Our God relationship starts slipping off the radar, standards slip, commitment slips, spiritual life sleeps. – Scripture says “asleep” means “dead.” We could dive into the implications of that, but in the focus of the chapter, we can say this with certainty; to be asleep, to NOT be awake means, NOT being blessed in a time of serious misfortune.

CLOTHED

How about being clothed?

Here is quick survey of how Scripture uses the imagery of wearing something:

- **Isaiah 61:10** talks of garments of salvation and a robe of righteousness.
- **Revelation 7:14**: those coming out of the great tribulation with robes washed in the Lamb's blood.
- **1 Peter 5:5**: clothed in humility.
- **Romans 13:12**: clothed in the armor of light.
- **Galatians 3:27**: clothed with Christ.
- **Luke 24:49**: clothed with power from on high.
- **Ephesians 4:24**: putting on the new self which is in the likeness of God.
- **Colossians 3:12**: putting on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

The fabric of God's clothing is compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. God clothes with power that this world cannot grasp. God's clothing is light; light stands for order, truth, and clarity. God's clothing is God Himself; the new self doesn't try to be like God, the nature itself, is like God. We just keep it from "falling asleep."

To be naked is to be found without these virtues covering you. God understands, we get a tear every now and then, the wrong thing is showing for a moment, but that's why we have an advocate in Christ. But to be naked is to discard the garment. In this world, these garments are not in fashion anymore, so we just leave them at home. You know what; sometimes these garments of God even get heavy and we're tempted to take them off, we forget the coming night is cold and dangerous.

BOTTOM LINE

Here's the thing we can take from Revelation this morning, even beyond chapters 15, and 16: There is no doubt that there will be great suffering and trials, there will be the misfortune of many as their disconnection with God comes to its full effect; but even against the backdrop of all of this, there will be those who are BLESSED. In a time of MISFORTUNE, they will be most FORTUNATE.

It will be those people of God who make it through. They will be those who have- stayed awake, and remained clothed. Considering what that means Biblically; does that describe you?