

**Revelation 7:9-17**  
"When the World Falls Apart"  
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During the past few weeks as Chuck and I have been preaching on Revelation, you may have wondered where all the 'good stuff' is. Where are all the calamities? Where are the horrible plagues and disasters, the four horsemen, and the unraveling of the world? This is Revelation! There's supposed to be some freaky stuff going on!

Well, as it turns out, a lot of that freaky stuff is in chapter 6, which we heard in our first scripture reading this morning. We saw John's vision of the Christ figure, the only one worthy of opening God's scroll and proclaiming its message, slowly begin to break the seals on the scroll. With each broken seal, a new horror was unleashed upon the world. There was the rider on the white horse, representing conquest; the rider on the red horse, representing war; the rider on the black horse, representing economic injustice, and then the rider on the pale green horse, representing pestilence, famine, and death. Following the fabled "four horsemen of the apocalypse" the servants of God are slaughtered in huge numbers. Finally, with the sixth seal there is an earthquake. The sun turns

black. The moon becomes like blood. The stars fall from the sky; the sky itself vanishes like a scroll being rolled up; the mountains and islands are removed from their places. The world is literally falling apart.

Now it's important to remember here as we are reading this that the book of Revelation is prophecy, not prediction. This is God's word to God's people in all times and all places. It is not a forecast of events that will spell the end of the world. Nor is it a coded message that we need to decipher to connect events in the world around us with the last days. Remember that John, the author of Revelation, is describing his vision using symbolic images and the language of poetry. When he writes about things like conquest, war, economic injustice, pestilence, famine, and death, it's because these are things that he has seen, both in his vision and in the world around him. When he's describing "the great tribulation", he's talking about the ongoing challenges and evils that confront God's people on a daily basis. The early church father Augustine argued that the great tribulation is unfolding in the lives of Christians in all times and places. Whenever we proclaim the good news of Christ's kingdom we come into conflict with the

powers of this world that oppose it. The great tribulation is the inevitable struggle of the church in every age against the evils of the world around it.

We've gotten away from that idea a little bit since the days of Augustine. Christians today are more inclined to read Revelation as an almanac of future events, assuming that tribulation is bound to a fixed point that is far down the road. They also assume that true Christian believers will somehow be "raptured" away from all the mess, that they will be exempt from all of the pain and suffering that the great tribulation will bring.

The problem with that, however, is that Revelation doesn't say that. In fact, Revelation says just the opposite. When the fifth seal on the divine scroll is opened, John sees those who had been *slaughtered for proclaiming the word of God*. There's a connection here between being a faithful follower of Jesus and having really bad things happen to you! There are faithful people being killed *because they are faithful*. They cry out to God with a loud voice, asking God to stop the slaughter and punish the rest of the earth's inhabitants instead. God's responds simply by giving each one a white robe, and telling them to wait until even more are killed. It

doesn't exactly sound like the faithful are being whisked away from the atrocity, does it?

There's an old story from the fifth century about the legendary King Aengus of Ireland, who came to St. Patrick to be baptized. St. Patrick carried a sharp-pointed staff with him wherever he went, and at some point during the baptism liturgy he leaned on it and accidentally stabbed the king's foot, piercing it clean through. When he had finished baptizing the king, St. Patrick looked down and saw a great pool of blood at his feet. Realizing what he had done, he begged the king's forgiveness. "Why did you suffer this pain in silence?" Patrick asked. The king simply replied, "I just thought it was part of the baptism." The king was more correct than he knew, and being stabbed in the foot during his baptism could have been called a Revelation moment. John's vision shows us that *tribulation is a part of our identity as Christians*. Bound up in who we are is the experience of pain and suffering. We remember in every baptism and every communion that we observe that Jesus Christ himself did not escape pain and suffering, and neither will we.

When we fall into the misguided assumption that God will keep us safe from all harm because we are Christians, we set ourselves up for a spiritual disaster. I once met a woman in a cancer treatment center who said, "I always believed that it was God's job to keep me safe and protect me because I had faith in him. When I was diagnosed with terminal cancer that God disappeared. So did my faith." We do far better, I think, when we assume that we all will experience pain, suffering, disease, death, injustice, and evil in our lives, and in each of those moments when it feels like the world around us is unraveling, God is still there with us. That's the message of Revelation.

As John sat sequestered on the island of Patmos, I imagine that he was well-acquainted with the evils of the world. He would have seen conquest, war, famine, pestilence, and death first hand. He also would have been keenly aware of the militaristic expansion of the Roman empire during that time. It was Rome that ruled all facets of life and demanded loyalty. It was the Roman emperor who promised salvation and protection from the dangers of the world in exchange for money, allegiance, and worship. This is how the Roman empire expanded - it promised safety, security, peace, and

well-being for all who subjected themselves to the rule of the emperor. Salvation from all these evils of the world was to be found in Rome. Christian believers during the time of the Roman empire faced some very difficult questions: if God was so powerful, then why did the Emperor seem to have all the power? Why did it seem like the best way to survive was to trust in the military power of Rome? Many Christians living in the Roman empire had to choose between pledging loyalty to Rome and worshiping the gods of the state to secure their safety, or proclaiming their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and dying as a result. What do you do when your world falls apart, and suddenly you're face-to-face with conquest, or war, or economic injustice, or pestilence, or famine, or death? Where do you turn for salvation? In whom do you put your hope?

According to Revelation, there's only one answer. You turn to God. You put your hope in the God who created you, sustains you, and redeems you. You endure the evils of the world with patient endurance and faith. You proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord and you give our ultimate allegiance to no other. You worship, and praise, and put your trust in God alone, and proclaim as loudly and

as clearly as you are able that salvation belongs to God. John sees this in his vision, and he wants us to see it as well. Look and see:

*There was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,*

*‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!’*

*And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, singing,*

*‘Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom  
and thanksgiving and honor  
and power and might  
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.’*

These white-robed worshipers are the very ones who were slaughtered, the ones who came through the great ordeal. These are God's people, and they are a multitude so large that no one can count them. Though they saw pain and suffering and death, they were *triumphant*. They triumphed not because they escaped death -

Christ himself did not escape it - but because, like him, they are God's children. They belong to God. They are *sealed* to God, by God.

Did you notice that in John's vision, at the same time the world is falling apart as one seal after another is broken on the scroll, other seals are being created? In those days seals were primarily made out of wax, and they bore the imprint of their creator. They implied ownership. In John's vision this countless multitude of people endures a great tribulation that comes at the breaking of seals that only Christ could open, but they also become victorious because they bear the seal that only God could give. To each one in that vast multitude, God says, "You belong to me."

The day will come in the life of every Christian when the world falls apart. We ought not assume that we will escape the devastation by virtue of our faith. Neither should we seek security or salvation in the powers of this world. No, when the world falls apart we ought simply to meet the atrocities head-on with patient endurance and faithful hope. In so doing we take our place among a multitude of God's people too great to number, a multitude of the faithful from every nation, time, and place who are loved, claimed,

and sealed by God. What do you do when the world falls apart?

You *worship*.

And you believe... that you'll see the day when there will be no more conquest, no more war, no more pestilence, no more hunger, no more thirst, no more pain, or suffering, or death, for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be your shepherd, and he will guide you to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from your eyes... and you will see clearly... for the first time...

... that Salvation belongs to God. And so do you.

Thanks be to God. Amen.