



GRACE CHURCH

The Picture of Eternity

Revelation 7:9-17

Chase Strickland

Grace Church | 5.17.20

Good morning church. I'm just going to go ahead and let you know that we are going to be talking about suffering. It's an interesting timing for this text, as it is a passage I am passionate about and have wanted to preach it for a while, and in the Lord's providence he had me preach right after we finished the book of Lamentations. So, while I know we have dealt with a lot of sorrow and suffering over the past several weeks, we are going to spend one more on this topic. This time, however, we will spend our time not in the current suffering, but in the picture of the end of suffering. Turn with me to Revelation 7.

The Russian author Dostoevsky, some of you may have heard of him, wrote many books but one of his most famous is titled *The Brothers Karamazov*, written in the 1800s. This book covers a very wide scope but within this book is a story of two brothers. Ivan and Alyosha. Alyosha, the younger brother, is a novice at an Orthodox monastery. Ivan, the older brother, has long been a difficult, but thoughtful person. And in one passage he begins to question the principles Alyosha is claiming to believe as a monk. Specifically, he begins to ask him questions regarding the suffering in the world. He pushes him and presses him regarding the supposed goodness of God when he sees so much pain and suffering in the world. And he understands the concept of punishment for sin, but at the heart of his struggle is seeing what he understands to be good people suffering. He uses the example of children that suffer and are oppressed all over the world and he tells Alyosha that he cannot justify good people suffering and being persecuted by evil people in the world. He does not understand how God could allow this to happen. It does not seem worth it. And so, in the culmination of his argument he tells Alyosha, "too high a price is asked for harmony; it's beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it. And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. And that I am doing. It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return him the ticket."

Ivan sees the suffering and persecution of good people in the world and so his answer is to say, "I want nothing to do with this God. I want nothing to do with his standard of perfection." This is his answer, but I believe we often face the same question. This book as a whole has endured, and more than that is thought of as one of the masterpieces of literature. This section about the problem of persecution is one of the reasons why. It is an enduring question. We relate to it. We understand it.



We see it ourselves. The world is full of suffering and persecution. Even of God's people! God's chosen people, his saints, continue to suffer! And though Alyosha does his best to respond to Ivan's questions, I think we can do better.

We can do better by opening the word of God. And I think we will see today that, not only can we lament in a Godly fashion, but in our pleas for God's mercy, we can ultimately trust God's goodness even in the midst of suffering. He gives hope to the Christian. What we will see today is that in the midst of suffering, our hope is that God will redeem and restore his people. He will redeem and restore his people. It is an age old problem. This persecution and suffering we see in the world. But this text gives us hope. This text gives us purpose. So what is happening in this text? Well in the book of Revelation, the apostle John is given a prophetic vision, revealing to him "the things that must soon take place" according to verse 1 of the whole book. It shows John a picture of the second coming of Christ, the end of this world and the creation of the new heaven and new earth. It is a divisive book, with many scholars having differing interpretations of what events and people in Revelation could refer to, but I think unfortunately when we do this we often lose sight of the larger theme of the book.

The main thrust of this book is not to discover the exact time Jesus is returning or what the beast represents or stuff like that. The main theme of the book is exactly what I already mentioned. The second coming of Christ. The utter defeat of Satan. The salvation of the redeemed and judgement for the unbeliever. The victory of Jesus and the restoration of all creation.

So, if we seek to interpret the book of Revelation, we must keep these ideas, these principles of Satan's defeat, Christ's victory, and our salvation and restoration first and foremost. So, that being said, let us look at chapter 7. Read this text with me. Revelation 7:9-17.

In verse 9, John says after this he beheld a great multitude. The "after this" directs us to the previous section, where John heard an angel proclaiming those sealed by the Lord, numbering 144,000. Now again, the point here is not that literally 144,000 will be saved. The point is that God knows his exact number of children. He knows all those that will be saved and he will not leave a single one of them behind. They will all be saved. And so, after being told this, John next beholds a great multitude! The saved! This follows a pattern throughout the book of Revelation of John hearing and then seeing what he was just told about, furthering his understanding. So John sees this multitude, people from every tribe and nation, worshipping, rejoicing in the Lord. They are joyful, jubilant. But what does this have to do with suffering? Well look what happens next. One of the angels asks him who these people are, knowing John does not know. So the angel then explains who these people are in verse 14 (READ).

These are the people who have come out of the Great Tribulation. Tribulation. Meaning troubles. Trials. Hardship. So what is this great tribulation? This great hardship? Well it is actually referring to a prophecy in the book of Daniel in chapter 12, where he says that "At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble (tribulation), such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But



at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book.”

So he is referring to this time of great trouble, mentioned in Daniel, that is clearly a time of suffering for GOD’S PEOPLE, because they are God’s people, all whose names are written in the book, not for just any human, and will come before the deliverance of God’s people. This great trouble, this period of tribulation, is debated among scholars. Some would say that this time is the entire history of the church. The Christian life is one of suffering, as Jesus so explicitly promises in John 15:20, “If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.” So some scholars would say the time of Great Tribulation began with the suffering of Jesus and extends until the second coming.

Others would say that this refers to a specific time within the history of the church. That right before Jesus returns the suffering and persecution of the Church will increase to greater than ever before and there will be this period of extreme suffering. Truthfully, I lean towards the other interpretation, that this period is the entirety of church history, because I do not see much evidence or any reference to this being a unique time period and the suffering of the church is mentioned all over scripture. If you want to disagree with me, however, I don’t think it is that big of a deal. In fact, I think our application and understanding of the text remains largely unchanged. Even a commentator who disagrees with me still notes that “persecution has always been the lot of those who follow the lamb.” And so, whichever way you want to interpret the Great Tribulation, we see here in this text the problem Dostoevsky presented. The suffering of good people. The persecution of people who we feel should not be suffering, such as God’s people. This is undeniable. We see it all the time in the news. We experience it in our lives. I’m sure you’ve been thinking about it over the past month working through Lamentations! And what I want you to think about today is how the suffering of the world, the hardships and pains, have influenced you specifically as a Christian. The ways that suffering attacks our faith.

And I think we see our faith attacked by two kinds of suffering. Cosmic and personal. Maybe the suffering of the church attacks your faith because of the cosmic suffering of creation. Whether you personally experience it or not, you still see systematic racism. In other countries. In your own country. Even among the church you see people treated differently, looked down on, or ignored because of the color of their skin or the accent they have. These broken systems and suffering people behind them leave you in this place of questioning. God, is your word true? Why must the world be this way? Why must your children continue to endure prejudice? Why must your people continue to aid the cause of prejudice?

Or maybe you’ve experienced these attacks in more personal ways through broken relationships. You have family members who refuse to be in the same room. The person you used to call your best friend, the person who knew and understood you best hasn’t spoken to you in years. This could happen because you stood for Christ when your friends or family did not. But it could also have happened simply because it was a relationship between two sinful people, and so you have felt abandoned. Isolated. Unloved. Or you have felt this brokenness through sickness and death.



I've been with three friends in the last year and a half who suddenly lost one of their parents at a fairly young age.

And in these moments, the same thoughts come up. Where are you in this, O God? If you are loving and kind how could you allow this to happen? I have proclaimed your goodness to others but how am I supposed to point to it in sincerity with all of this pain?

The Christian life is one of tribulation. One of suffering. And honestly it is often because of what we believe that we suffer. Many of those things would not be as hard to deal with as they are if we did not cling to the truths of the Bible. We could decide God was unjust or cruel and embrace that. We could deny any wrongdoing, claiming our own perfection and our broken relationships are the fault of others. Like Ivan in the *The Brothers Karamazov* we could tell God his standard is wrong and he is not good. But we don't. We cling to Biblical truths and it seems to sometimes amplify our pain. To turn to God and say, "you have called us your children. You have said you are on our side, working things for good. If this is true why doesn't it feel that way? Why do I feel like I see the opposite of that? Why does it feel like you oppress me?"

And so what is God's response to this? How does he care for and encourage his saints who are to go through this suffering? As Drake said last week, our lamenting is not meant to leave us in a place of hopelessness. It does not leave us in despair but points us towards the end! And so here he gives us a picture of the end. Of what will come after the suffering and because of the suffering. For it will end. It will end and we will be brought into this wonderful picture of rejoicing in the presence of the Lord.

So the first part of God's encouragement in suffering, is that God will redeem all of his people. He will redeem all of his people. This is what the white robes mean, as it demonstrates the two parts of redemption, salvation and purification. They have been purified by tribulation, as Daniel 11:35 says; "some of the wise shall stumble (from the trouble. The suffering they are undergoing), so that they may be refined, purified, and made white, until the time of the end, for it still awaits the appointed time." The people of God stand in white robes, pure and whole. No more suffering, no more brokenness. Pure. Whole. Clean. Healthy. The people of God refined. And the whole people! This is another reason why I would argue the tribulation is the entirety of church history, because this is not just a subset of Christians that will be given white robes. It's not like the super-Christians will be wearing white robes and the rest of us will be in brown sack cloth. Revelation 22:14 says, "Blessed are those who wash their robes so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates." Only those clothed in white will enter the city, will access the tree of life. So if only those clothed in white robes that have been washed will enter eternity than ALL Christians will be clothed in white! As verse 9 says, people of every tribe, people, and language! As God redeems all his people he brings the diversity of creation into a unified whole, all with robes washed white! But how do we wash our robes? Look down to the angel's response to John in verse 14. They have come out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb.



Now when it says “they have washed”, is this referring to good works they did that washed and saved themselves? No. They are not saving themselves through works. Look at verse 10. What do they cry? Salvation belongs to our God alone! It is only through him! He holds them fast! And then for even more specificity, verse 14 shows us it is washed In the blood of the lamb! If this were their own works, it would be their own blood that washes their clothes. But it is not. It is the blood of Christ. But the wonderful thing about Christianity is Christ did not merely take away our wrong doings. He did not just take away our sin and say, “now you are neutral so go do good things to get to heaven.” No! He also gave us his righteousness! He gave us his good works! We call this imputation of righteousness. And so through faith, the works of Jesus become our good works, not because we earned them, but because he has made us one with himself through the blood of the lamb!

The blood of the lamb! Now this is a striking picture. Blood. Scarlett blood. Making something white? Clean? This sounds so backwards to us, but it is one of the great paradoxes of Christianity! The blood of the Lamb, throughout Scripture a reference to Christ, that cleanses us. This is the gospel! That God sent his son down to earth to live among us, broken sinners wilfully disobeying God’s perfect commands. He obeyed the Father perfectly and then he died on the cross. He was beaten, he was bruised. Thorns shoved into his brow in a mockery of a crown. Nails pounded into his hands and feet. The only true innocent died. He endured the ultimate “great tribulation” as he suffered on the cross! And as the blood ran, as he laid down his life, he took the punishment we deserve and gave us the righteousness of the perfect life he lived. So that for those who believe in Christ, God looks at us and does not see disobedience in need of punishment. He sees the blood of Christ, a punishment met, and he sees the perfect life of Christ as our white robes, our righteousness.

So the washing of their robes is not their own saving works, but instead as we confess and believe that Christ’s perfect life and his blood is our salvation, our robes are washed by his good deeds, by his suffering!. And not just a single time, but clinging to this, confessing and believing even in our suffering, daily in our tribulation, trusting and knowing that God is ultimately who saves us and will bring us through our suffering, and that this suffering is refining us. Our suffering, as it unites with the suffering of Jesus, purifies us! This then begs the question. What is God saving and refining us for? This brings us to our second encouragement in suffering.

God will restore his people to rejoicing forever. He will restore his people to rejoicing. And so what he does is he gives us a beautiful picture of this restoration in verses 15-17.

What a glorious picture this is! The people of God united with God forever! This text is what we should dwell on, what we should picture, when Drake said last week that we should view our sorrow in eternity and long for Christ’s coming! This is what it looks like! not merely the end of current suffering but they will have radiant joy! It will fill us with joy that pours out in praise! The people joyfully cry out to the Lord as he restores them in verse 9 and 10, praising him above all things! And we see in this three ways that God restores us. Three truths of restoration to turn to in the midst of suffering. When God restores us, this means he gives us his presence, his provision, and his protection.



In Verse 15, he shows that he gives us his presence. It says they are before the throne of God day and night in his temple. Day and night is unceasing! He never leaves! And the temple does not mean a physical building we will never leave, but what did the temple represent to the Israelites? God dwelling among them! His presence, as it says at the end of verse 15! I actually love the very literal NASB translation of this verse. "Shelter in his presence" is translated literally "He who sits on the throne will spread his tabernacle over them." He is all around them, keeping them in his presence as they serve God in his presence for eternity! His people used to be separated from him, even when his tabernacle was in their midst, he was separated by the tabernacle from the people. Now, his presence is restored to them! His tabernacle is all around them! And as his presence is restored, his provision is restored.

This whole passage is a picture reminiscent of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. But in verse 16 we see God's provision in its entirety. In the wilderness, they were hungry and thirsty. Here, when they are restored, they shall hunger and thirst no more. In the wilderness, the sun beat down on them, burning their skin and weighing down their spirits and physical bodies with oppressive heat. Here, they shall not feel the scorching sun.

And you see, this hunger and thirst are not just physical needs. They aren't simply saying God's people won't get hungry. But just as Jesus said he is the bread of life and he is the living water. He is referring to so much more. This is part of what Jesus means when he says blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness in Matthew 5. They want righteousness, justice, goodness, and so they feel the hole when it is not there! Think back to the troubles of this world. The pain of brokenness. I think about my friends who have lost loved ones. There are days where you just feel that hole. That place in your life they used to be. That will be gone. You will no longer thirst or hunger. You will not feel this emptiness. This brokenness. What you are actually longing for, righteousness, justice, will be restored, in your life and in all of creation. The Lord restores us in giving us his presence and his provision, and with his presence he protects us.

God restores us to complete protection from all future suffering! Seen throughout this passage but especially in the second half of verse 16 and referenced by verse 9. In verse 9, the people wave palm branches, a reference to Leviticus 23 and the Feast of Tabernacles, where the Israelites would celebrate God's protection of them. This picture in Revelation shows the fulfillment of that celebration in Christ! And so here we are protected. Our current suffering is not just ended and made whole but there will be no future suffering! You will never again wake up to the horrific news of injustice, the scorching heat of sin in the world, that weighs you down. Never again will you be beaten down by that moment a relationship breaks. In Revelation we are shown a place where this will never happen again. You are freed of that burden, that draining weight, forever, as all is made right. What a sweet picture this is. A sweet picture of the fulfillment of God's promises!

This whole passage is a fulfillment Isaiah 49, where much of this exact language is used. Verses 8-10 of Isaiah 49 say:

Thus says the Lord: "In a time of favor I have answered you; in a day of salvation I have helped you; I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people; to establish the land,



to apportion the desolate heritages, saying to the prisoners, 'Come out,' to those who are in darkness, 'Appear.' They shall feed along the ways; on all bare heights shall be their pasture; they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them."

This has been promised to God's people all the way back in the book of Isaiah, in Leviticus, and more, and here John gets to see the fulfillment of it! He sees The people of God restored: he sees them sheltered, protected, by his presence. And there they will be provided for perfectly. Just as God protected the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, so here too the people of God, not just Israelites but from every nation, overflow with joy that their God has protected them from the wilderness of the old, sinful earth, and brought them back home, restoring us to the garden of Eden forever.

Forever! This is his promise to restore us forever! And how does he do this? Well verse 17 gives us this answer. In the culmination of his restoration we see that God restores us to his presence, provision, and protection by Christ, the lamb, guiding us as our shepherd. The Lamb is also our shepherd. This again feels like a contradiction but is a key part of the Biblical story. Just as red blood washes the robes of the saints white, pure, the sacrifice, the servant, is also the leader. And so he gives us his provision by Christ guiding us to "living water", to the "still waters and green pastures" Psalm 23 promises. And what is the living water but himself! And so in his provision he ensures we are brought and kept in his presence, he guides us to himself! And as Shepherd he guards us from the wolves. He protects us. And So God restores us by Christ our Shepherd.

And all of this results in this wonderful description, beautiful in its simplicity, God will wipe away every tear. The pain and brokenness you have felt will be gone. He will take it all away. You won't bear scars. There will not be residual pain from the suffering. You will not be stuck in the aftermath of suffering, waiting for restoration, as Jeremiah was in Lamentations 5. Not only the current suffering has ended, but its reverberations, its effects, the tears it causes, are gone. You will be new. Whole. Pure. Redeemed and Restored.

This is such a beautiful picture. My hope for you, fellow Christian, today is that you would find encouragement in this text. That you would rejoice in this text. That despite past and current hurts, you would look to Jesus, our perfect lamb, cleansing your robe in his blood. That as we have studied a picture of Biblical lament the last month, your lamenting would always end with returning to this picture! You would dwell on this picture that John gives us of the age to come. And this would sustain you in the present. Sustain you by looking forward to the restoration with our king and trusting that your tribulations are purifying you. That it would create a holy longing, a Godly desire, for the age to come, for Jesus to return, that pushes you towards holiness in this life! And if you have not died to yourself, repented of your sins and believed in Christ as Lord, the good news is this beautiful picture of redemption and restoration is open to you today. John saw a great multitude. All kinds of people. There is no type of person that does not qualify. Believe that the blood of Jesus alone redeems you, you need him to save you, and you too will be restored when Christ returns.



