

October 29, 2023 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

Don't Despair! It's Going to Get Better...Much Better!

Did you know that a black hole is not really a hole? It's just an area in space that we can not see. As a spaceship launches, its engines need to overcome the power of gravity which is holding the spacecraft on the ground. Now, think of a place where gravity is so strong that NOTHING can overcome it. When a star dies out and explodes, it produces a HUGE gravity field so strong that not even light can escape from it. I can see you right now because light is bouncing off of you and reaching my eyes. But when light shines into a "black hole," it can not bounce back because the gravity is so strong. If you shine a flashlight into a black hole, it will still look black. Astronomers know there are things inside the black hole, but we can not see them. You would win a Noble Prize if you could send a satellite into a black hole to take some pictures and return to earth.

That is what the book of Revelation does for us. The Bible tells us that there is a heaven, but we can not see it. It's like a black hole to us. The Lord gave the Apostle John this revelation of heaven to give believers a glimpse of what is waiting for us. In the hymn we just sang, life on earth was described with words such as, "labor, a fight, darkness, a struggle, warfare." It would be easy to get discouraged and despair and so God gave us this book to encourage us. Here in Revelation 7, the Apostle John tells us, "Don't despair! It's going to get better...much better."

As John was staring at the glory that is waiting for us in heaven, he saw people who were wearing white robes. He was told (:14), "**These are they who are coming out of the great tribulation.**" As believers die and enter heaven, they are leaving behind the "great tribulation" of life on this earth. The word "tribulation" has the idea of pressure, or being squeezed, or stress. Can you relate to that? Any stress in your life? There are all sorts of things that give us stress. The daily grind of getting up and working and preparing meals and paying bills and keeping the car running, can grind us down and leave us feeling worn out. Turning on the news does not help as we hear about the continuing war in Ukraine, the increasing war between Israel and Hamas, and the threatening war as China keeps stepping up their military training. Are you waiting for test results from the doctor or facing a surgery that adds to your anxiety? Do you try your best, but your best isn't good enough? I just read the results of a new study showing that our society has still not recovered from the COVID chaos. The problem isn't COVID itself. The problem is the turmoil that upset our culture during the pandemic. Psychologists say that the United States is experiencing a "collective trauma,"

with anxiety and depression rising. Do you get frustrated easily when others don't meet your expectations? Have people treated you poorly and made you feel like a loser? Have you felt overwhelmed, brokenhearted, burned out? Have there been times when you felt like your future was just one big black hole of nothingness?

Such tribulations have been effecting all humans ever since Adam & Eve introduced sin into the world. But there is another type of tribulation that effects only believers. Have friends and relatives and others mocked you for your faith and moral values? Have you lost friends and relatives because of you are a Christian? It's discouraging to hear how Christian churches across the country are shrinking and struggling. It's discouraging to hear how many churches which call themselves Christian do not teach what the Bible says about morality and salvation. How does it make you feel to see immorality being pushed and paraded around in our country? How does it make you feel to hear Christians labeled as "hate-filled radicals"? But the worst is the tribulation in our own hearts. Our stinking sinful nature is a constant drain on our well-being. We do not have to make an effort to give into temptation. It happens so easily. Have you ever promised God and yourself [Or maybe I should ask how often you have promised God or yourself] that you would not commit that sad sin again, but you did? Have you felt terrible because you disappointed others? That you disappointed God? We are infected with sin and sin oozes out of us every day through impure thoughts, improper words and imperfect actions. That's our greatest tribulation and we can not do one thing to change it or stop it. Everyone of us is suffering and dying because of sin.

Being sinners in a sin-infected world can become overwhelmingly discouraging. It is so easy to get depressed and despair. That's why the Lord gave the Apostle John this peek into the black hole of heaven. There is so much in this section of Revelation 7, I'm just going to read it and comment. You'll probably want to follow along. John wrote,

"9 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 before the Lamb." Heaven is filled with a great multitude of people from all over the world. If you look carefully, you'll be able to see the smiling face of a loved one, or even see yourself. You are included in that group. In heaven, we can stand before Jesus, the Lamb of God. Our sinfulness might make us feel a bit scared to stand in front of Jesus. Remember how Peter reacted when he realized he was standing in front of God. "Deport from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." But Jesus has already taken all of your sin and guilt away. You have NOTHING to be ashamed of. You can stand in front of Jesus without any fear.

“They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.” When you were baptized, you were wrapped with the robes of Jesus’ righteousness. He lived a perfect life and he wraps you in his perfection to cover over all your sins. At the time of Jesus, people waved palm branches at a victory celebration when the enemy was defeated. Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus defeated the enemies of sin, death and the devil. We celebrate just like the people on that first Palm Sunday when Jesus rode into Jerusalem to complete salvation. The early church had a neat tradition. When someone died, for the funeral, they would place a palm branch in his hand. It was a visual reminder that the believer had left the great tribulation of this world and was now celebrating in heaven.

¹⁰ **And they cried out in a loud voice:** [When people leave this world, it’s usually with a small whisper because they are so weak. In heaven, they’ll be strong and loud.] **“Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”** Salvation belongs to our God in the sense that God is the source of salvation. He should get a patent for salvation. He figured it out and he made it happen. He sent Jesus into this world to become fully human while still remaining true God. Jesus was punished for all of our sins as he died on the cross so that God will not punish you. He rose from the dead to give you life after death. Our God is the author of salvation. It comes from him.

¹¹ **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,** ¹² **saying: “Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!”** Even the perfect angels in heaven bow down before God and his magnificent glory. Maybe you noticed that there were seven words of praise that they sang. In the book of Revelation, seven is a special number indicating the happy harmony of humans (4 points of the compass on earth) and God (3). This is still another reminder that in heaven, we will enjoy happy harmony with God.

We’ve already covered what occurred in verses 13 and 14. ¹³ **Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?”** ¹⁴ **I answered, “Sir, you know.” And he said, “These are they who are coming out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”** When you get into heaven, every spot and stain of sin will be removed forever.

¹⁵ **Therefore, “they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple;”** [Serving God is not a chore or job. Think of a family happily working together to decorate the house for Christmas. Music is playing and everyone is having a good time. That’s not work. That’s quality family time.] **“and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.”** A more literal translation would be, “God will have his tent set up over us.” Don’t think of a small tent that kids set up in the backyard. This is a huge tent that families could live in, especially back at Bible times. The point is that you will be living with God, in his residence, constantly content and safe.

¹⁶ **‘Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,’ nor any scorching heat.”** Any of the things that made you uncomfortable on earth will not be in heaven. How many of you complained about the snow we had this last week? In heaven, the weather will be perfect all the time. ¹⁷ **For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water.’** [Jesus will serve us as a shepherd, constantly providing everything we need and protecting us from anything bad. No worries. No fears. No stress. No tribulation.] **“And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”** [We won’t wipe our own tears away, nor will any angel. God, himself, will deal with you as an individual. He will look you in the eyes, give you a hug of love as he welcomes you to your home of eternal happiness and will wipe away every tear. Every sad thing that happened on this earth will be left behind and you will never ever be sad again.]

How many times in your life have you looked up to heaven and asked, “Why God? Are you really there? Are you really in control? Do you really love me? Why am I suffering so much for so long? Is there really a heaven waiting for me?” And when you look up, you don’t see God or heaven. It’s like looking at a black hole, but it’s there. In one Dennis the Menace cartoon, Dennis and his friend Joey were looking up at the beautiful night sky with the sparkling stars and he said, “If heaven is so pretty on the bottom, imagine how beautiful it is on the top.” My friends, Jesus said that life on this earth would not be easy. So, do not get discouraged. Do not despair. Hang on to Jesus and rejoice that it’s going to get better...much better. That’s God’s promise to you. Amen.