

Nov. 12, 2023 (Saints Triumphant A)

Revelation 7:13-17

“Life is PAIN – but Heaven is Coming!”

Picture yourself as a hostage being held in one of the tunnels under Gaza by Hamas right now. ***How would you describe your life at this moment?*** Horrific, scary, tragic, fearful, brutal, miserable, disgusting, painful, cruel . . . and possibly very short. I don’t think any of us have been held hostage in times of war and experienced anything like those poor souls are facing right now. But . . . I’ll bet most of you *have* seen a loved one at death’s door. *What was life like at that moment?* You could probably use some of the same adjectives I just mentioned to describe *that* setting.

LIFE can be incredibly painful at times. I like that quote from the Princess Bride where the main character says, *“Life is PAIN – anybody who says otherwise is trying to sell you something.”* When life is really, really, painful – boy – isn’t it nice to hear God tell us about HEAVEN? He tells us what it’s like. He tells us about His Son who shed his blood for us that we might enjoy that paradise forever. The words of our text have (and will) bring comfort and hope to many of God’s people when life gets about as painful as it can possibly get. **Revelation 7:13–17 (NIV)**

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 have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 15 Therefore, “they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

16 ‘Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,’ nor any scorching heat. 17 For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; ‘he will lead them to springs of living water.’ ‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’”

God has more perspective than humans do (obviously). He sees the eternal side of existence; He resides in heaven and He tells us that there are PEOPLE there – human beings that He describes in this way: **“These are they who have come out of the great tribulation.”**

TRIBULATION encompasses those adjectives we threw out earlier. Tribulation is: suffering, affliction, distress, sorrow, pain, hardship, etc. You can understand the TRIBULATION God is speaking of here as a WAR. It has a start point and a finish point. It has its messy parts, it has its stretches of relative calm, and then it has its *really* ugly and painful points. It has casualties, losses, and battles, and it also has its victories.

The book of Revelation describes the NT age from the time of the Apostles (after the Resurrection and Pentecost) to the time of Jesus’ Second Coming when the war is finally done and it’s all over. The CHURCH; the Invisible Church – that is, all God’s children by faith in Christ, are fighting to hang on to God’s Saving Truth and fighting to spread the Gospel over the face of the whole earth. Revelation describes the horrible enemies God’s people face – the enemies RAGE. From false religions and open persecutions, to other blatant attacks, from the decline of the world we live in to the devastating attacks of false doctrine and pure evil that threatens Christianity from the inside.

What’s the point of it all? God is fighting for **souls** – He wants souls to be washed in the blood of His Son that was shed for the Salvation of the world. He wants souls to have that salvation, to spread that salvation, to enjoy that salvation – here in this world of PAIN and also then *there* in the glories of Heaven. We are his FOOT SOLDIERS. We’re fighting to hang on to Christ and fighting to promote Christ. Our faith is fighting to survive when choked by the materialism, selfishness, and desires of the world around us. Our faith is fighting to show itself, to thrive, and to make a difference even while our physical bodies run out of time, grow old, weak, and finally succumb to death. Life for God’s foot soldiers is a painful struggle, but a necessary struggle that God uses for His loving plan to save souls.

Notice how God describes the victorious Saints in heaven: **“These are they who have . . . Decided for themselves who God is and worshipped Him in their own way – NO, that’s not what it says. Tried hard to be decent people – NO, that’s not what it says. Stuck out above the crowd as exemplary human beings – NO, that’s not what it says. Said enough prayers, and done enough good deeds – NO, that’s not what it says. THIS is what it says: “These are they who have:**

come out of the great tribulation' they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

What a beautiful picture of Saving Faith. Spiritually clinging to the foot of our Savior as He suffered and died on the cross, while His innocent blood runs over us; we see it by FAITH – cleansing us from every sinful thought, word and deed. These souls are going to Him for forgiveness and righteousness – trusting in Him for salvation. And, (as God says) His saints will one day enjoy the joyful GOAL of it all: life in His presence; enjoying His eternal mansions, lacking nothing, and living forever, and shedding no more tears ever. That's the amazing future waiting for everyone connected/linked to Christ by faith. God will bring us through the tribulation to be with Him forever. We will live FOREVER – that means our whole existence down here on earth is only page 1 of chapter 1 – and each of us has a story that will never end.

Notice how **God** describes His SAINTS: they fought through this brief life of pain and tribulation on page 1. They looked pretty sad and pathetic on page 1, like the people Jesus describes in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5). Yet they knew they were children of God and clung to Him by faith as the Apostle John describes them. On page 1 they were all filthy with sin, but they had their robes washed in the Blood of the Lamb. Then He brought them home and you flip to page 2. These same people still love to worship and praise their Savior God. They still love to serve Him but now do it face to face in heaven. They stand in perfect unity and there are no divisions between them. Their *real* story has just begun it'll go on forever.

Contrast *THAT* with how we so often look at our lives. We, at times, can't even see past page 1 – and we get so wrapped up and bogged down with everything that's wrong and painful down here. We get engrossed in things that don't really matter – and sadly worship and service to God and my neighbor can take a back seat. We let this world rob us of our joy and pit us against one another. We get stressed out and angry about so much – especially as Christmas looms and we get so busy and worn down. We long to experience a little slice of heaven here on page 1 – and we do all we can to avoid PAIN at all costs.

So what does God say to His struggling people who so often get things all mixed up? He says COME TO ME. Come wash your filthy robes in the Blood of the Lamb and be spotless. Come look at

my Word and see things clearly. Remember that you're only on page 1 of your story and on page 1 it's filled with pain and tribulation. It's always been that way and it always will be until Jesus comes again in glory. You'll get through it. Remember who you are – you are a SAINT in God's eyes and beginning on page 2 of your story everything will be just right. Come and understand that *tribulation* is actually a necessary tool (only on page 1) that God uses to win souls for eternal life and to keep souls out of Satan's clutches. We're stuck in a WAR on page 1 – but for each of His children the war only lasts one little page.

Yesterday was **Veterans Day** – and that day makes me think of all those poor soldiers, suffering in those horrible conditions, fighting those horrible battles, and giving their lives for the sake of freedom. For many of them page 1 wasn't very long at all. We can be thankful for what they did – we enjoy the results of the battles they fought and we thank God for the sacrifices they made.

I've also sat down with people facing death and suffering horribly, and many times I've looked at these words from Revelation with them. It's hard to understand, especially at the time, but they had to fight those battles. We honor those heroes of faith too. We can be thankful that they fought through the tribulation clinging to Christ – God makes certain that His Saving Cause will benefit from that pain / those struggles and battles that were fought by His foot soldiers on page 1 of their stories.

Take this picture of heaven that God gives us in **Revelation 7** and let it influence your LIFE. HEAVEN is real and it's waiting for all who have their robes washed clean in the Blood of the Lamb. this means I can LIVE through page 1 no matter how painful it gets. I can handle life, even when it gets really bad, because I have a purpose. I have the tools and weapons I need to fight the battles God puts before me. I have the Gospel I can share with people – God's plan of salvation for sinful humanity. I have time and talents and money I can use to fight for God's loving cause. Rest is coming, so I can struggle now – struggle to cling to my Savior, struggle to see things clearly in a confusing world, struggle to seize the chances God gives me to fight for lost souls. I have an eternity without tears, beginning on page 2, so I can handle the pain that comes to me down here. We can even face death itself – it's just the turning of the page where you and I get to stand with all God's saints and enjoy *His* home forever.