

Surviving the Time of Great Distress

Acts 13:14, 43-52
Psalm 100
Revelation 7:9, 14b-17
John 10:27-30

Last week, we looked at some of the important theology found in the Book of Revelation, especially in the first five chapters. We looked at how the symbolism and allegories found in Revelation often leave readers confused and frightened, and yet the Book was written to be a source of consolation and encouragement to Christians, especially Christians who are going thru difficult times. Our readings today from Revelation, as well as the other three readings, remind us of that wonderful consolation and encouragement!

Our second reading today comes from a very unique part of the Book of Revelation, a part known as the “interlude” (Revelation chapter 7:1-17). This interlude is wedged between the vision of the breaking of the first six seals and the breaking of the seventh and final seal. It consists of two images—the Church on earth (7:1-8) and the Church in heaven (7:9-17). This chapter uses symbolic language to describe a great multitude of people from every nation who are marked by God. Some people become preoccupied with the number 144,000 and don’t go any deeper into the meaning of the chapter. The number was not intended as a code to be deciphered, but rather, it represents a great multitude of people. Other readers get stuck at the image of God marking His people, because it reminds them of the “mark of the beast” described later in the Book. Instead, we are invited to go deeper, into the beautiful meaning of John’s vision.

The first half of chapter seven, the image of the Church on earth, tells us that God seals His faithful people. In other words, He marks us in a special way as His own. It is very important for us to remember that we are marked by God. We cannot spiritually survive difficult time unless we truly know that we belong to God and He eternally loves us. Through John’s vision we are reminded that those marked by God will persevere *through* the great persecution. God does not promise to protect us *from* struggles, difficulties, pain, and persecution, but will protect us *through* them. The last half of chapter seven shows us the truth of God’s eternal care for us.

In the image of the Church in heaven from our second reading today, one of the elders proclaims, “These are the ones who have survived the time of great distress” (Revelation 7:14). This is the image of the Church triumphant! The saints in heaven are not rejoicing because they avoided persecution and difficulties, but rather, because God loved them *through* the persecution and difficulties. It is because God’s faithful people stood strong in faith, hope, and love through their struggles that they now stand before His throne where, “they will not hunger or thirst anymore, nor will the sun or any heat strike them,” but God will, “wipe away every tear from their eyes.” This vision—the very idea of our being marked by God and eternally loved by Him—should fill us with hope, encouragement, and zeal! That’s what it did for Paul and Barnabas.

In our first reading today, we heard about the missionary struggles of Paul and Barnabas. In so many of the places they preached, including Antioch, they faced opposition, “jealousy and with violent abuse” (Acts 13:45). Yet, we are told that they continued to preach the Good News and were even “filled with joy and the Holy Spirit” (Acts 13:52). How could they be joyful in the midst of such trials and tribulations? They knew they were marked by God—eternally loved by Him! This is the sole message of our Responsorial Psalm today! Psalm 100 tells us—

Shout joyfully to the LORD, all you lands;
worship the LORD with cries of gladness; come before him with joyful song.
Know that the LORD is God, our maker to whom we belong,
whose people we are, God's well-tended flock.
Enter the temple gates with praise, its courts with thanksgiving.
Give thanks to God, bless his name;
good indeed is the LORD,
Whose love endures forever,
whose faithfulness lasts through every age.

We belong to God! Could the message be any clearer?! If so, then Jesus clarifies it in the Gospel reading—

My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. No one can take them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one can take them out of the Father's hand.

-John 10:27-29

The message of chapter seven of the Book of Revelation is simple—no matter what you're going through right now, persevere and even rejoice in your suffering because God loves you and is loving you *through* this difficult time. Whether we are being persecuted for our faith, struggling with addictions, dealing with illness or grief, suffering loneliness or abandonment, dealing with financial hardships or legal problems, regardless of what our difficult situation is—God has marked us as His own and will love us *through* whatever we're suffering.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:

- ✚ Read Revelation 7:13-17. Place yourself in the story as one of the persons that the “elder” is referring to. What “great distress” have you gone through in your life? How did you experience God’s love in or through it? Who are some of the people that God sent to you to help you “survive the great distress”?