

A few years ago, I was at lunch with several other pastors. As it often does, the conversation turned to theological matters and we were soon deep in discussion over some matter of Christian doctrine. I don't know what we were talking about, but I'm sure more than a few people in the restaurant overheard us.

Among them, was our waitress. And shortly after we received our bill from her, she commented on this fact. She asked us, "Are you all pastors?" Yes, we're all pastors. "And you're all Christians, right?" Yes, yes, we're all Christians. "And you all believe in, like, heaven and hell, right?" Yes, we all believe in heaven and hell.

She nodded, obviously deep in thought. And then, out of nowhere, she asked us, "So... what if we're all in hell right now?" Excuse me? "What if this is hell? And we just don't know it. Cause... things are pretty rotten. And sometimes I wonder if *this* is a punishment."

It was the kind of comment that can leave even a table full of pastors a bit speechless. Because, on the one hand: no, this isn't hell. The Bible makes that clear. In fact, it says quite the opposite. If this were hell, there would be no hope of salvation. And the entire message of God's Word is that we live this life in the hope of Christ.

On the other hand, I can kinda see where she's coming from. Because there's a lot in this world that does resemble hell. The Bible says that hell is a prison. It is a place of suffering and death where Satan and his followers will be bound for all eternity.

And when I say his followers, I don't just mean his demons. I mean every person who breaks God's Law. Who fights against God's kingdom. Who rejects God's Son. It is a prison for Satan. It is a prison for his demons. And it is a prison for sinners as well.

But this world can feel like a prison. A prison of sickness. A prison of suffering. A prison of death. A prison in which we have been abandoned by God. When you look at all the evil people in this world. All the disasters that happen. All the disease and pain. It all really starts to feel like a prison.

So I don't blame that waitress for supposing we might already be in hell. We live in some pretty hellish times. And that gets to you after a while.

St John knew a little something about living in a hellish world. Of all the Christian traditions surrounding the apostles, the ones concerning St John are the most numerous and the most credible, in my opinion. And those traditions say that after the apostles were forced out of Jerusalem by the Romans, John went to Ephesus, in modern day Turkey.

He preached for many years, building up a strong church in the region. So strong that it caught the attention of the Roman emperor Domitian. A man who hated Christianity with every fiber of his being and persecuted the church to no end.

Domitian had John arrested. Dragged to Rome. Sentenced to death. And taken to the Colosseum. Where, for the amusement of the crowds, he was publicly dropped into a vat of boiling oil.

And he survived. In fact, tradition holds that he was completely uninjured. That the entire colosseum was converted to Christianity. And that Domitian, furious that his plans had been thwarted, but realizing that he could not kill this man of God, that he was physically unable to end this man's life, instead had John exiled to the island of Patmos. Where he received a revelation from God. And wrote the words of our First Reading.

John knew what it was like to live in a world that really was a prison. Where the tortures of hell existed on earth. And where death could come for any person at any time. Without warning. Without reason.

And in our lesson today, he tells us that during that Revelation on Patmos, he saw a great multitude of people. Too large to count. People from every nation on the planet. Worshipping before the throne of God. They were wearing pure white robes. And they were holding palm branches, like those who welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem.

But they weren't shouting "hosanna" like those crowds. No, hosanna means "save us, Lord." It's a petition. A request. "Please, save us." The crowds that John saw knew that that request had already been fulfilled. And so, instead, they cried, *"Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."* We don't need to shout hosanna because you have already saved us, Lord. Salvation is found in You and You alone.

But then one of the elders there asks John, "Do you know who these people are?" This great multitude in white. Standing before God. Declaring his salvation. Do you know who they are?

John doesn't know. And even after the elder explains it to him, I'm not sure how many of us know who they are either. He tells John that they are *"the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."*

First of all, what exactly is a "tribulation?" Christians use it as a fancy theological term. But it actually has its origins as a farming term. In Latin, to "tribulare" means to thresh grain. To take the stalks of wheat and beat them against a stone over and over again until the seeds separate and fall to the ground.

That's the image that John is creating here. The great tribulation is a time when people will be threshed like grain. Beaten against the rocks until they simply fall apart.

But who? Who are those coming out of the great tribulation? Well, John tells us that too. He says it is all those whose robes have been made white in the blood of the Lamb. A number too great to count. Coming from every nation in the world.

Those coming out of the great tribulation are Christians. God's people. In every time and every place. They are the great cloud of witnesses. They are the communion of saints. And they have suffered through the great tribulation. They have suffered through Emperors who boil them in oil for the pleasure of the crowds.

They are, in fact, all those who have suffered cruel death at the hands of evil men. All who have endured earthquakes and hurricanes, tornadoes and floods. All who have been tormented by COVID and cancer, Alzheimer's and heart disease, old age and stroke. All who live in places where there is no clean water. No food to feed their children. No clothes to keep them warm. No medicine to treat their wounds.

We are those in the great tribulation. Because the great tribulation isn't a single moment in time. It is the history of sinful humanity. From the Garden of Eden to the day Christ returns, we are grain. Threshed against the rocks by sin, death, and the devil. Beaten by Satan and his demons. Beaten by the evil world around us. Beaten by our own sinful choices. Until we simply fall apart, like wheat from the chafe.

John's Revelation is a prophecy about us, and all those who have come before us and all those who will come after us. About us suffering through the great tribulation. But, even more importantly, about us coming out of the great tribulation. Washed clean by the blood of the Lamb who was slain on the cross of calvary. Washed in the water of baptism until we are pure white. Free from the sin that causes all this pain.

So that we can stand before the throne of God as His saints. Just as all those who have come before us do at this very moment. Saints who stand before his throne, praising the glory of his salvation. Which conquers every evil of this world. And shelters us from all suffering. Never again will we hunger. Never again will we thirst. The sun will not beat down on us, nor any scorching heat.

For the Lamb is our Shepherd. Who leads us to springs of living water. That well up inside of us to eternal life. Who leads us through the very valley of the shadow of death. And comforts us so that we fear no evil. For nothing – not evil men, not natural disasters, not any disease of this life – nothing can take us out of his hand.

He is our shepherd. Our good shepherd. Who washes us clean. Shelters us in his love. And leads us out of this sometimes hellish world. Wiping away every tear from our eyes. For when we are finally standing before his throne, like all those saints we remember today, there will never be a reason to cry again. Amen.