

“Impossible. Difficult. Done.” // Revelation 6–7 // *Revelation #7y*¹

Announcement

Intro

Well, if you have your Bibles, and I hope you do, open them to **Revelation 7** ... Let’s stand together, if we could, for the reading of God’s Word.

9 After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” 11 And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near. (Rev 1:3)

You may be seated.

How many *Mission Impossible* fans out there? I’ve always loved Tom Cruise in those ... he’s no Nic Cage, but he gets an honorable mention.

Each one of the 422 *Mission Impossible* movies starts basically the same. Ethan Hunt opens some suspicious-looking package that contains an invitation to save humanity from some sinister villain hell-bent on a global catastrophe.

It’s never an *easy* mission, of course—otherwise, the movie series would have been called *Entirely Possible and Only Mildly Interesting Missions*. No, these are **IMPOSSIBLE** missions, and they require Tom Cruise to drive 100 miles an hour down a crowded European street, jump between roofs of downtown skyscrapers, dangle off train cars teetering on the edge of collapsing bridges, and of course, for Tom Cruise to run full speed for several sustained, painful minutes through back alleys and crowded marketplaces with one too many buttons undone on his shirt. (What is it about Tom

¹ Sources consulted: Tim Chester, *Revelation for You: Seeing History from Heaven’s Perspective* (London: The Good Book Company, 2019); Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006); John Piper, “[Christ Has Purchased Global Praise: The Blood, the Beast, and the Boast of Race](#)”, May 8, 2019, Bethlehem College and Seminary Chapel | Minneapolis; Dr. Conway Edwards, “[It’s About the Finish Line, Not the Timeline](#)”, November 5, 2023, One Community Church; Jen Wilkin, “Seven Seals”, Session 4 of Revelation: Eternal King, Everlasting Kingdom Bible Study, July 1, 2024; Louie Giglio, “[The Righteousness and Wrath of God](#)”, June 2, 2024, Passion Church; Matt Chandler, “Your Strength in Christ”, Session 3 of The Overcomers Bible Study of the Book of Revelation, rightnow Media and Harper Christian Resources, May 7, 2024; Philip G. Ryken, *The Message of Salvation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001). And others as noted throughout.

Cruise and how the man thinks he looks when he runs?) And all the while, of course, Cruise exchanges cool-headed, witty banter with the beautiful, perfectly manicured model who somehow got stuck with him in his daring escapade.

You know, really relatable stuff.

In the pages of our Bibles, you and I are given an even more impossible mission than that. Should you choose to accept it, it's called the Great Commission. Our instructions didn't self-destruct in our hands, however, though the one who gave them to us ascended back up into heaven right after he gave them:

Matt. 28:19–20: Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

And then he went back to heaven. Now, this was not a new command that Jesus pulled out of nowhere. Jesus wasn't like, "Hey, we've got a great product here; let's take it global." It was, in fact, the fulfillment of one of the oldest promises in the Bible, a promise God had given to an old, sterile man and his old, barren wife, Abraham and Sarah. In Genesis 12, he appeared to these two octogenarians to tell them he had chosen them to rescue the human race from the curse of sin and all the woes of Genesis chapters 3 through 11. He was going to bring from them a new nation; and from that nation would provide a forgiveness of sins that would bless the whole world. ~~Genesis 3–11 is filled with stories of the effects of the curse of sin; showing us both the damage it causes and its seeming incurableness. Those stories culminate in a massive rebellion project in Genesis 11 where mankind unites to build a tower declaring their independence from and equality with God, called the Tower of Babel. In response, God mixed their languages and scattered humanity across the face of the earth.~~

~~And then, immediately, in the opening verses of the next chapter, Genesis 12, God appeared to Abraham and Sarah, telling them he's going to bring these nations back together, but this time united around a different kind of tower—not one that declares man's independence from God, but one that declares his *DE*-pendence on him.~~

At the time, it seemed an impossible and unrealistic mission, but here in Revelation 7 (what we just read), we see it fulfilled.

This vision comes at the end of two chapters about something called "the great tribulation," which we skipped in our reading. Look again at verse 13: Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes [that is, the ones worshiping around the throne], and from where have they come?" 14 I [John] said to him, "Sir, you know." And he [one of these 24 elders] said to me, "These are the ones coming out of **the great tribulation**. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

That "**great tribulation**" is what chapters 6–7 are about. In fact, the "great tribulation" is going to be the subject of the next 14 chapters. In some ways, it's the main focus of Revelation. Today, I'm going to introduce it to you, answer a couple of theological questions, and then show you how it leads into this glorious vision of chapter 7.

By the way, I should point out: Chapter 6 is the point in the book of Revelation where most people stop reading Revelation, because this is where the book gets less inspirational and more confusing and scary. But there's great stuff in here, so LET'S GO.

6:1, "Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals ...

- Remember, last week we had the problem of a scroll, which is like the title deed of the earth, which no one except the Lamb was worthy to open because it had been sealed with **seven seals (PIC)**, which represented God's judgment against sin.
- I introduced these seven seals to you last week; let's go through them again. The **1st seal = OPPRESSION/DOMINATION, symbolized by a rider on a white horse with a crown on his head and a bow in his hands (Revelation 6:1–2)**. This rider is the one we call "the Antichrist," and the crown he wears represents world domination. Think of him basically as sitting on top of the Tower of Babel. Later we'll learn that the first part of his reign is relatively peaceful: He unites the world under one world government and brings a lot of prosperity. But then, halfway through his reign, he turns violent and oppressive, which leads me to ...
- **The 2nd seal = WAR, symbolized by a bright red horse, the rider of which has a great sword (Revelation 6:3–4)**. The Antichrist, after initially promising great peace, brings great war on the earth.
- The **3rd Seal = FAMINE, symbolized by a rider on a black horse with a scale in his hand (Revelation 6:5–6)**, the scale indicating the rationing of food, like you would do in a famine.
- The **4th Seal = DEATH, symbolized by a rider on a pale horse, with Hades** (or, the destruction of hell) **following close behind (Revelation 6:7–8)**. Verse 8 tells us that during this judgment, a quarter of the world's population dies. Just for frame of reference, during Covid, somewhere between 0.1 and 0.2 percent of the population died. Here, it'll be a quarter of everyone. We're talking massive death.
- The **5th Seal = THE CRY OF THE MARTYRS (6:9–11)**, cries of "How long, O Lord?" Because believers suffer greatly during this time, both under the persecution of the Antichrist and all the calamity happening on earth.
- The **6th Seal = COSMIC DISTURBANCES (6:12–17)** which point to massive environmental problems, and not the kinds caused by throwing plastic straws in the intercoastal waterways. Verse 12 says there are "great earthquakes" (like worse than the one in Russia this week) and "the sun became black as sackcloth" (this may refer to volcanic activity) and "the moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth ..."² It points to earthquakes and meteors and other terrible things.
- (The **7th Seal = GREAT SILENCE IN HEAVEN**), which we'll get to in chp 8.)

Now, all of that sounds really intense, dismal, really ... well, really bad. But something to keep in mind is that chapter 6 is about what's happening in the kingdom of man, but chapter 7 pivots and looks back UP, toward heaven, at what's happening in the kingdom of God. And it shows us that in the midst of all this judgment, God is still moving in redemptive ways.

² Cf. Matthew 27:51, 45.

Chapter 7 is all about 144,000 witnesses whom God raises up during this time; witnesses who will, we will learn, lead in the greatest revival in world history during this tribulation. **7:3** tells us they have a seal on their heads that ensures their protection—this seal doesn't protect them from all suffering; it just means that they will be supernaturally preserved as they evangelize the whole world.³

In Verses 4–8, John does the odd thing of telling us it is 12,000 from each tribe: “Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel. From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben 12,000 ...” (And so on, listing out all 12 tribes and their 12,000.)

Now, for those of you who are bad at math, $12 \times 12,000 = 144,000$. As we've learned, the numbers in Revelation are full of symbolism. “12,” we've seen, is the number representing the people of God—as in, the “24 elders” consisted of the 12 tribes of Israel and 12 apostles, symbolizing God's people in both the Old and New Testaments. The number “1,000” symbolizes fullness and totality, so the fact that we have **12x12x1000** indicates this is a full and total evangelizing body.

NOW, it's important to note that these are not the only people saved during the tribulation—I point that out because Jehovah's Witnesses try to say that these 144,000 are the only ones who will go to heaven. (Have you seen them standing at the front of the RDU airport inviting you to take their material? If you talk to them, this is what they'll say.) At the end, only 144,000 go all the way to heaven.

But Revelation 7 indicates this is an evangelizing body who leads in a global revival, bringing lots and lots of other people from every tribe and tongue to heaven with them.

But this brings me to the first major theological question I want to tackle:

- **“Are these 144,000 actual Jews, or is this just a metaphor for the church?”** As in, the 144,000 is a symbolic number pointing to the church itself; the church is the new Israel and basically completely replaces Israel in all God's plans going forward. Is that true? *“Are these 144K actual Jews, or is this just a metaphor for the church?”*
- And we'll follow that up with a related question: **“Is this ‘great tribulation’ of 7:14 a literal 7 years coming in the future or just a metaphor of the age we live in now?”**

Wow, great questions! I can tell you really wore your theological big-boy pants today. You ready?

On the first: ***I think the 144,000 point to a special place for believing, ethnic Jews in the future.***

Like I said: Some say that we, the church, have replaced Israel; that we're the “new Israel” and that any references you see to “Israel” in the New Testament after Jesus' resurrection really apply to the church.

³ See 7:3–4; 9:4

But here's why I don't think that's true. First, the fact that John lists out the different tribes gives a distinctively Jewish character to this group. You don't get more "ethnic Jew" than the tribes. Right?

Second, other Bible writers **clearly point to a future for ethnic Israel also**. Stay there in Revelation 7, but let me jump over to **Romans 11** for a minute. **Romans 11:11**: The Apostle Paul is talking about how the nation of Israel, ethnic Jews, mostly missed Jesus. Right? Jews, for the most part, did not and have not embraced Jesus as their Messiah.

11 So [Paul says] **I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall?** (In other words, did their stumble over Jesus mean they are permanently out of God's plan?) **By no means!** Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. **12 Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!**

Israel's rejection of the Messiah (their stumble), Paul says, opened the door for US, the Gentiles, to be saved (most of us in here are Gentiles, or non-Jews). Because Jews in the first century mostly rejected Jesus, the apostles began to focus most of their preaching to the Gentiles. That means, Paul says, we Gentiles got a greater chance to be saved because Jews wouldn't listen—their stumble opened a door for us. But, Paul hastens to add, that's not the end of the story for them. There is still a future **"full inclusion"** for them. And, Paul reasons, **"if the Jewish people's rejection of Jesus led to all THIS Gentile salvation, imagine what will happen when they embrace him?"** I mean, God promised that ethnic Jews would be a blessing to the world. If even their rejection of Jesus blessed us like this, imagine what their embrace of Jesus will lead to.

That might be what John is referring to in Revelation 7. When these Jewish people embrace Jesus, it's going to lead to the most massive revival the world has ever seen.⁴

One more place. Let's go to **Acts 1, vs. 6**: Jesus is on the mount, getting ready to ascend back up to heaven. This is after the resurrection; he's just given the Great Commission, and the disciples ask, **"Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"** Jesus has died and resurrected; he's given them the Great Commission, and they are still convinced that God has a future for the nation of Israel—ethnic Jews—in his plan. It's crystal clear that at this point they still believe God has future plans for ethnic Jews, right? After listening to Jesus teach about the kingdom—for *three years*—including hearing him teach on it for 40 days after the resurrection—they still believe God has a plan for ethnic Jews in the future. After hearing him teach on this for three years, you're telling me they still don't understand the basic nature of the kingdom?

Equally interesting is Jesus' response to their question. He doesn't say, **"When will I restore the kingdom to Israel? Fellas, don't you get it? THE CHURCH IS THE NEW ISRAEL. THERE IS NO MORE ETHNIC ISRAEL."** That's not what he said. Instead, he said (Acts 1:7) **"It is not for you to know**

⁴ Paul continues, Romans 11:25 ...I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in (that's us). 26 And in this way all Israel will be saved... (That is, this will lead, Paul says, to one day Jews as a whole accepting Christ as Messiah).

times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power to be my witnesses ...” In other words, Jesus doesn’t deny that there **will be a future** for Israel; instead, he says it’s not for us to know WHEN that time is—implying that God does indeed have a time.

So again, I see a literal future for Israel, and this is what I think chapter 7 refers to. Now, I want to be very clear: I know that we are watching a number of things playing out globally right now, and this is not about an interpretation of current events or commentary on international affairs. Believing what I just said does not mean that you’re signing on to everything the nation of Israel does today as an act of God, or saying that they get some kind of privileged position in world politics. OK? Those involve different questions. I generally am a supporter of Israel, but we’re not talking necessarily about becoming a part of the Zionist political movement, OK?

This leads me to our second question (***You still with me? I’ve got some killer takeaways for you here at the end, but tighten your belt and put on your nerd glasses for about seven more minutes, OK?***)

Second question: “Is this ‘great tribulation’ of 7:14 a literal 7 years coming in the future or just a metaphor for the age we live in now?”

Some say it’s just a metaphor, just a symbolic representation of the age we live in now, an age filled with suffering and disease and natural disaster and anti-Christian world leaders—things like the seven seals.

But I’ll just say: ***I believe the tribulation is an actual 7-year period coming in the future.***

(I want you to notice that in both of these questions, I have used the words “I think” and “I believe,” words I typically don’t use during messages—and that’s because I recognize that this is a place where faithful Christians can, in good conscience, disagree. At our church, we don’t think uniformity in our perspectives on the details of the end times is part of central Christian belief, and it’s OK if you don’t see eye-to-eye with me on all the finer details here. OK? But I didn’t want to just not teach on this—so I’m trying to show you the essentials and then how I interpret some of the details.)

So like I said: ***I believe the tribulation is an actual 7-year time coming in the future.***

And I believe that because I think it makes the most sense of all the biblical data. All this stuff in Revelation is written as if we’re talking about actual events with actual people that are actually going to take place in the future. We’re experiencing the beginning tremors of them now, but there’s a future intensification of them coming.

I showed you this the first week: In one of his other books, the Apostle John says, “This is the spirit of antichrist, which you have heard is coming into the world and is already here” (1 John 4:3).

- See? John believes that an antichrist is coming into the world (that’s future) but his spirit is already here (present).
- The fact these powers are at work in the world now doesn’t mean there’s not a future intensification of them.

In fact, this is important: **I think the best way to see the tribulation is as an intensification of what we're already going through.** A future time where all the things we're experiencing now in the world come to a head.

The other reason I believe that the tribulation is an actual seven years coming in the future is that I believe it's most consistent with how the prophet Daniel talked about it.

Remember how I told you in our first week that in the **400 verses of Revelation** there were more than 500 Old Testament references? And remember that I told you that the Old Testament book referenced most in Revelation is Daniel?

All theologians—amillennialists, premillennialists, all of them—agree that this tribulation is a fulfillment of Daniel's "70th week" that he talked about. **Daniel 9:24:**⁵

[This is an angel speaking to Daniel] **Seventy weeks are decreed about your people [Daniel's people, the Jews] and your holy city [Jerusalem]—to bring the rebellion to an end, to put a stop to sin, to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most holy place.**

70 total weeks involving Daniel's people, the Jews, and Jerusalem, until the end of time. Now, very important: A "week" in the Jewish language just means a period of seven—it could mean seven days, or it could mean, as it does here, seven years. A week of years. So, **1 week = 7 years**. And how many weeks are prophesied? **70**. So, **70 weeks x 7 years** that's **= 490 years**.

And what happens at the end of those 70? (**vs. 24**) *"Rebellion will be brought to an end and a stop will be put to sin; iniquity will be atoned for; everlasting righteousness will be brought in; all biblical prophecy will be fulfilled, and the most holy place will be restored."*

But notice, vs. 25, that Daniel breaks these weeks up: **25 Know and understand this [the angel tells Daniel]: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until an Anointed One, the ruler, will be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks.**

When do these first 69 weeks start? (7 weeks and 62 weeks = 69). They will start at **"the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem."**

- ****GRAPHIC:**⁶ That decree was given by King Artaxerxes of Persia around 445 BC, a story told in Nehemiah 2. Starting at 445 BC, there will be **seven weeks** (49 years, which is roughly how long they say it took to rebuild Jerusalem, and that will be followed by 62 more weeks).

⁵ See sermon, ["It's All Part of the Plan: Dan 10-12,"](#) Daniel series from 2021.

⁶ See Bullpen

Now, watch this—this will blow your mind. **Daniel 9:26** says, "After *those* sixty-two weeks [plus the first 7] the Anointed One will be cut off..."**So, **7 weeks and 62 weeks = 69 weeks**, and then the Anointed one will be cut off.

69 weeks, 483 years. **If you start here at 445 BC**, (when Artaxerxes issued the decree to rebuild Jerusalem) and go **483 years** in the future, that lands us at ... **AD 32**, roughly the date that Jesus was crucified. That's when "***the Anointed One was cut off.***" (This is a pretty incredible prophecy, I think! God gave Daniel the date that Jesus would die 480 some years before it happened.) (Now, some of you that are super quick at math say, "Wait ... 445 + 483 years doesn't get us exactly to AD 32 ... That's because you have to use a 360-day year, which is what Jewish people at the time used, and that would get you to AD 32)."

OK, that brings us to here, the end of the first 69 weeks when the Anointed One is cut off.

But, Daniel continues, **Daniel 9:26**, after the Anointed One has been cut off, "The people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary... And he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering." Here Daniel is referring to the Antichrist, who will come, conquer, rule, and for the first half of his seven-year rule it's going to seem like everything is hunky dory. But then things will change, and all hell will break loose.

****The seven years of tribulation in Revelation is Daniel's 70th week.** Again, all theologians agree on that.

The question is, are they a literal seven years or a symbolic seven years? I read them as literal because the previous 69 weeks were basically literal, and I think it makes the most sense given everything.**

And that's what leads us to this incredible scene at the end of **Revelation 7**, the culmination of biblical history: vs. **9** After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, **10** and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

So I've got three major takeaways for you. And like I said, you can and should embrace these fully, even if you disagree with me on some of the details of how all this shakes out. Or if you're one of those people who say, "Look, I still have no idea what I think. Premill, amill, postmill ... I still don't know what those words mean." I've got a friend who says he's pan-mill—meaning, he doesn't know HOW it will all go down at the end, but he

knows it will all **pan out** with Jesus on the throne. So whatever you are—premill, amill, or run-of-the-mill confused—this is the part I really want you to pay attention to. These are the takeaways. **Three things:**

1. Be Alert

Many commentators point out the similarity of the seals in **Revelation 6** with the prophecies in **Jesus' Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24 and Mark 13**. Jesus uses a lot of the same imagery and language—and it's clear he's talking about the same events. In that chapter, Jesus uses the word "alert" seven times. **Mark 13:33, "Be on guard! Be alert! [Because] You do not know when that time will come."**

These seal judgments show us that this present world is not our home, and Jesus tells us seven times when he talks about them to be alert because it's *so easy* to let this present world become our home! I can tell you that from personal experience. It's especially true when you have a pretty good life here. **C.S. Lewis said wealth and comfort and the praise of people** have a way of knitting your heart to this world.

The faithful Christian life means walking by faith with confidence in what we can't see (that is, prioritizing what we CAN'T see and feel above what we can), and again, I will tell you from experience that that's HARD. Because here's the thing:

- The praises of people now **feel real**. You feel chuffed when you get them—and you're like that flower that starts growing toward the "sun" of people's praises. You ever seen that? You've got a flower in a flower pot, and the sun is over here and so the flower starts growing that direction, toward the sun. I'm like that with people: I start getting praised, and I think, "Oh, I want to hear that again ..." and so I start doing things, even subconsciously, to try and get that praise again. But the gospel tells me, "Don't seek the approval of others; only seek the approval of Christ." And that's hard because I can't see him or hear his voice yet. And I have to intentionally correct myself—I'm not going to grow toward this praise, which I can see and feel; I'm gonna grow toward his praise, which I can't see or feel yet.
- In the same way, the physical pleasures of the world **are real**. SIN feels good. Like the country preacher says, "If sin ain't fun, you ain't doin' it right ..." Riches and comforts feel real. (Adon story?) And it's hard to forgo those things we can see and feel for invisible things you can't. You with me? It's hard.

But without faith, it is impossible to please God. Which means you have to train yourself to live this way.

My friend, **Pastor Conway Edwards**, says that when Jesus uses the word "alert," he thinks of the image of a sprinter, poised and ready to go. **(PIC)** You know that moment? It only lasts for a second or two, but when I'm watching the Olympics, it feels like forever. I get all tense in that moment, and I'm not even the one running! It seems like the whole world stops ... and then BANG! **It's on.**

That's how we should be regarding the coming of Jesus. I'm tuning everything else out, focused on *THAT*, listening for *THAT*.

Mark 13:33, "Be on guard" (Greek: **ble-pe-te**) — means 'eyes wide open'! **Be alert** (Greek: **agrup-nay-teh**; this word has urgency in it; be poised, ready; on a hair trigger)! [Because] **You do not know when that time will come."**

Does that describe you? I'd say some of us are more like a runner at the starting blocks who's not really paying attention: You're standing up looking around; you're noticing the outfit of the person next to you, their shoes—"Where'd you get those?" **Listen, you can't be alert and ready when you're focused on who has what and how much you have compared to someone else.** The life of comparison is the opposite of being alert and ready.

Or you're up walking around, lollygagging, talking to people in the crowd ... you're so focused on this world that you're just not going to be ready when that gun goes off. You're going to realize you spent your whole life focused on things that don't matter! ***You structured your whole life as if this world were your home.***

Be alert, be focused! Eternity is just around the corner, and the gun could go off at any minute.

2. Be Real

Listen: **however you interpret the specific timeline**, what is clear is that we're living in a world under judgment. Like I said: ***The best way to see the tribulation is as an intensification of what we're already going through right now.*** As John tells us, the 'spirit of antichrist' is already here and at work in the world.⁷ **So, whether the "GREAT tribulation" is coming in the future or it's something we're already in now, we live in a world of trouble and we should expect continued trouble until Jesus comes back.**

I am listening to this history podcast right now about the explosion of Mt Vesuvius that destroyed Pompey back in the day. Historians say that weeks before Vesuvius exploded, all these weird things started happening. Long tremors and small earthquakes. Earthquakes were not uncommon in that region, and nobody connected them to Mt Vesuvius. There was this one strange incident where a whole flock of sheep were grazing up on the mountainside and they all suddenly just fell over dead, all simultaneously. How weird did that look? They all just suddenly fell over. At the time, no one knew why it happened—the mystery of the suddenly collapsing sheep—now we realize it was gases from the volcano that were seeping out in the days before exploding and killing whatever was in their path.

That's how we should see the world we live in now. The **full tribulation** (the **great** tribulation) may not be here yet—the mountain may not have fully exploded, but we're already getting the tremors. ***The spirit of antichrist is already here and he hates you. You should never expect to be loved and appreciated by this world. And while it's true Jesus has taken away your sin, you're living in a world under judgment and that's going to affect you.***

But be encouraged, Jesus says, ***it's just for a little while***, and in the meantime, I'm using these trials for good in your life.

I love how Randy Alcorn says it: ***"This (troubled) world is as close to hell as believers will ever get... and as close to heaven as unbelievers will ever get."***

⁷ 1 John 4:3

So, be realistic about the world we're living in, and be alert and ready for the new one God is bringing and live for that one. Eternity is just around the corner. **~~Which leads me to the final thing:~~**

3. Be Confident

We arrive back now at this vision in Revelation 7 and see that when it's all said and done, this is what remains. And it shows us what we should be focusing on and what we can be confident will happen when we do.

~~Esau McCaulley in a book called *Reading While Black*, talks about the weariness of contending for what is right in a world that often seems hell-bent against it. You try something and get shot down. You accomplish something and the world undoes it. But he says that our suffering is only futile if scenes like this one in Revelation aren't true.~~

"Faith," I've heard it said, **"is living in a way *now* that you know then you'll be glad you did."**

One of my favorite mission stories of all time is one I heard in seminary. It's the story of **John Dober and David Nitschmann**—two young Moravians who, in the 1700s, became burdened to reach the inhabitants of one of the Caribbean islands, most of whom had been taken there as slaves. The two young Moravians wanted to go and share the gospel with these slaves, but the plantation owners said "No, there's nothing in that for us."

~~And so, the story goes, these two young men sold themselves into slavery to this owner so they could live among these slaves and preach the gospel to them. As word spread about their incredible sacrifice, Moravians from up and down the eastern coast of the US came to see these two men off. As they were shackled with chains and the boat began to pull away from the shore, one of the two young men raised his shackled hands and said, "May the Lamb that was slain receive the reward of his suffering."~~

So inspiring, right? But that's not the actual story. **It is true that the two young Moravians OFFERED to sell themselves into slavery**, but the plantation owner said no to that too. So in 1732, these two guys boarded a ship (not in chains, but as free men) and went to live on the island, not far from the plantation with all the slaves. They prayed for them, loved them, and shared Christ with them any chance they got.

Historian J.E. Hutton notes: "For 50 years they labored in the West Indies without any aid from any other religious denomination. It was hard work. Often mundane. **But when they died**, they left behind 13,000 baptized converts on that island, and a streak of new churches in St. Thomas, St. Croix, Jamaica, Antigua, Barbados, and St. Kitts."

That's the true story, and **honestly, I think the true version might be more inspiring to me than the exaggerated one**. You see, it's one thing to sell yourself into slavery in one dramatic gesture, but to get up every day and lay down your life for others, serve them, pray for them, demonstrate

Christ to them—that takes a resolve that goes down into your bones. **Their statement**, “May the Lamb that was slain receive the reward of his suffering . . .”⁸ you see, was not said in one rhetorical, cinematic flourish; it was said in the day-by-day sacrifice of their lives.

The vision that compels you to do that—to get up every day and live that way—is this vision in Revelation 7.

How are you involved? Listen: Because these two men obeyed, 13,000 slaves came to Christ. **Whose life will be affected by your obedience?**

- *I believe there’s somebody here that God is going to call to go live in Southeast Asia as a part of one of our church plants there.*
- *I believe there’s some of you that God will call to join up with our foster family ministry through organizations like Open Table or SAFE families. I believe there are others he’ll call to adopt.*
- *Or to join up with our prison ministry or our ministry to refugees, or go on your first overseas mission trip and join in with what God is doing around the world.*
- *Or just to walk across the street and tell someone about Jesus.*

Because these two men obeyed, 13,000 slaves came to Christ. **What’s going to happen if you obey?**

- **Listen: Imagine with me being around that throne here in Revelation 7 and looking into the face of someone who’s there** because you told them about Jesus—you got to see them baptized; or they were reached because of your financial sacrifice; or Compassion child you sponsored; whatever. You are going to get to know that person for millions of years, and you will love them with a perfect love. Imagine how much you’ll love them at that point. Don’t you think, in that moment, you’ll be glad for any sacrifice you made to get them there? Don’t you know you’ll think they were worth it?

Not only does this vision of Revelation 7 assure us our sacrifices are worth it, it inspires us to take audacious gambles in pursuit of it—because we know God has promised to bring this vision to completion.

It’s going to work! And every once in a while, we get an example of that. I heard a story this year that just blew my mind.

We had a college student here named Luke (an NC State student who was led to Christ by another Summit College guy at NC State. This guy disciplined him, and they began to share the gospel faithfully at NCSU. Then Luke, a new Christian, put his “yes” on the table and went through us with the International Mission Board as a missionary to London).

⁸ J. E. Hutton’s *History of the Moravian Church*, chapter 6. Repeated by Matt Papa in his song, “May the Lamb . . .”

Well, one afternoon while he was there, Luke was sharing the gospel in a London park and he said, “Honestly, it wasn’t going well—the guy I was sharing with wasn’t really responding, but after I ended this painful conversation, a young South Asian man I’ll call “David” approached me and asked if I was talking about the Bible and if I could share with him the stories I’d been trying to tell that other guy.” You see, it turns out this South Asian man had been having dreams he couldn’t understand: In his recurring dream, he was walking in a desert, and a Christian woman he had met was on one side of the desert reading a Bible, and across the desert was a group of people. That group of people—his people—asked David what the woman was doing, and he told them she was reading the Bible. The people in the crowd said they needed that book and to please bring it to them. So he took the Bible and started to cross the desert to bring it to them, but as he did, a voice from heaven said to him, *“I want to give you a new heart and a new spirit.”* “David” didn’t know Ezekiel 36:26; he’d never heard it and didn’t know it was in the Bible.

So Luke, our college student, tells him that’s a Bible verse, and they start to study the Bible together. This went on for several months and David really began to get convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, but **as a Muslim, really wrestled with trusting in Christ** because he knew his family would reject him or even kill him if he trusted in Christ.

Well, then his mom back in **South Asia got sick, and he had to move back home.** But he continued reading the Bible, and eventually got to a point where he said, “I have to give myself to Jesus.” **So he did.**

His older brother, **who was training as a Jihadi warrior, saw him reading the Bible one night** and asked David what he was doing, and David told him that he’d trusted Christ. So he beat David (physically beat him), and threatened to tell their parents if he caught him reading the Bible again. But then, later that night, **HE (the older brother) had a dream of a man in white saying** “Why are you persecuting me by hitting your brother?”

He wakes his brother up to tell him, and his brother says, “I think that’s in the Bible too” and they go looking and find Acts 9 ... That night, David led his brother to faith in Christ. So **they keep reading the Gospels and start preaching and teaching the Bible together in nearby villages.** A couple of imams—Islamic religious leaders—get saved and they join up with the Bible teaching, and this leads to hundreds of people getting saved. This is all taking place in one of the least reached regions on the planet. **So many got saved that they had to flee their home for fear of death.** But they keep going. (By the way, I almost didn’t believe this, but there’s an IMB [article](https://www.imb.org/2022/02/08/imb-journeyman-uses-visits-park-plant-new-bible-study/) written about it.⁹)

Well, last year these two brothers wrote to Luke, who was back in the United States at this point, and asked him if he could come out to South Asia and teach him and his brother how to baptize and plant churches.

⁹<https://www.imb.org/2022/02/08/imb-journeyman-uses-visits-park-plant-new-bible-study/>)

So last April, Luke and John (the other Summit College guy who led Luke to Christ) head off to South Asia to lead in these big mass baptisms.

Our college pastor said: *I remember Luke before he went ... there was nothing super special about him ... he was not a super Christian or the star ... just a student who took seriously God's call to engage in the nations!* And because of that, eternities are being changed!

That's the kind of thing Revelation 7 promises, and when you put yourselves in situations like that, you can count on it happening. It's why I often compare the work of our missionaries to the woodpecker ...

Hudson Taylor said, "There are three stages to every great work of God: first it is impossible, then it is difficult, then it is done." That's where I got the title for this message.

Jesus invites you and me to realign our lives so we are part of this vision. To realign your priorities—in your money, your time, your heart. **Are you in?**

This weekend, you'll get a **magnet**: Go, give, pray. Three ways to get involved. It may not be selling yourself into slavery or going to South Asia (it might be) but he's calling you to be involved, and I want to invite you to at least take the first step. This magnet will show you how.

I want every head bowed ... ask God, How do you want me to be involved? And then our worship teams will come.