

“Impossible. Difficult. *Done.*” //

Revelation 6–7 // *Revelation #7*¹

Announcement

Intro

(Did anybody else notice that the dog got named in that video but not the kids? We often say here at the Summit that we send our best, and usually that refers to members but apparently we send some really awesome dogs, too.)

We're so encouraged by what is happening through the Parks in SE Asia. They're actually back visiting with us this weekend, so we're happy to celebrate everything God is doing through them.

If you have your Bibles, 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.”

13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” 14 I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he 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.

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 at least gets an honorable mention from me.

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

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.

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 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 ever given to Ethan Hunt. ***Should you choose to accept it, it's called the Great Commission:***

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, Matthew tells us, when Jesus had said these words, he ascended back up to heaven, which I guess is his version of the message self-destructing in our hands.

It's important to note that this was not a new command that Jesus pulled out of nowhere. (Jesus wasn't like, "Hey, look, we've got a great product here; it's tested well in market; let's take it global!") No, this was, in fact, the fulfillment of one of the oldest promises in the Bible, a promise God had given to an old, sterile man (Abraham)

and his old, barren wife (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 forth from them a new nation; and from that nation he would provide a forgiveness of sins that would bless the whole world.

At the time, it seemed an impossible and unrealistic mission, but here in Revelation 7, we see it fulfilled. *Impossible Mission Accomplished.*

This great scene, however, comes only at the end of 2 chapters about something called "**the great tribulation**," which we skipped in our reading. See, look again at verse 13 with me: Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes (the ones worshipping 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 of Revelation.* The Great Tribulation is the main focus, historically speaking, of Revelation. Today, I'm going to introduce the Tribulation to you, answer a couple of theological questions, and then show you how it leads into this glorious vision of chapter 7.

(BTW, 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.**)

Back to the start of chapter 6. Vs 1, "Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals..."

- Remember, last week we encountered the problem of the scroll, which (we said) is like the title deed of the earth, the life God has for us, which no one except the Lamb was worthy to open because it had been sealed with **7 seals (PIC)**, seals that represented God's judgment against sin. The meaning is that no one can lead us to the life God has for us because encountering these 7 judgments would destroy us all. *These seal judgments stand in the way of us and the world God has for us.* Jesus alone could open it because he was sinless and absorbed the seals in our place.
- I introduced the 7 seals to you last week, but 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 (Rev 6:1-2).** This rider is the one we call "the Antichrist," and the crown he wears represents world domination. 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 (Rev 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 (Rev 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 (Rev 6:7-8).** Vs 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% 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?" Believers suffer greatly during this time, both under the persecution of the Antichrist (I mean, if he's anti-Christ he'll also be anti-Christian) and, they also suffer the calamities the earth is going through—these judgments aren't directed at believers, of course, but we live in a world going through them and so we suffer under them like everyone else.
- The **6th Seal = COSMIC DISTURBANCES (6:12-17)** which point to massive environmental problems, and *not the kinds caused by throwing plastic straws into intercoastal waterways.* Vs 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 how it could darken the sky) and "the moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth..."² This points to earthquakes and meteor showers 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; dark; really bad. But in chapter 7, John directs our attention away from earth, back up toward heaven, to what God is doing in the midst of all this. He shows us that in the midst of all this judgment, God is still moving in redemptive ways. Where sin and judgment abounds, grace much more abounds:

Chapter 7, you see, is all about **144,000 witnesses** whom God raises up during this time; witnesses who will, we will learn, lead in the

² Cf. Matthew 27:51, 45.

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 The Antichrist will not be able to stop them.

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 members in this group.)

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 "1000" symbolizes fullness and totality, so, the fact that we have **12x12x1000** indicates this is a full and total evangelizing body.

It's very 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—and I'm not saying that I have, or I'm not saying that I haven't, either—but if you do, 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 other people from every tribe and tongue to heaven with them. The scene in heaven at the end of the

Revelation 7 happens because of the work of the 144,000 at the beginning of the chapter.

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

- **"Who are these 144,000? Are they actual Jews, or is this just a metaphor for the church?"** (Some believe the 144,000 is a symbolic number pointing to the church itself. It calls them Jews, but the church, they believe, is the new Israel and thus replaces Israel in all God's plans going forward. Pretty much, any time you see "Israel" mentioned in the New Testament after Jesus' resurrection you should read it as "the church." Is that true? *"Are these 144K actual Jews, or is this just a metaphor for the church?"*⁴)
- And, we'll follow that up with a related question: **"Is this 'great tribulation' of 7:14 a literal period of time (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 completely replaced Israel in all God's plans for the future. God has no more plans for ethnic Jews.

But here's why I don't think that's true. Well, **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 listing out the tribes. Right?

today's ethnic Jews to these tribes, and the irregularities of the listing of the tribes themselves (Joseph instead of Ephraim; no Dan, etc). But, the distinctively Jewish nature of the listing points to a future place for ethnic Jews in God's future, a la Romans 11. I follow people like Craig Blaising here.

³ See 7:3–4; 9:4

⁴ Personally, I take the "progressive dispensationalist" approach, believing that it is a symbolic number (given the nature of the number, $12 \times 12 \times 1000$), the difficulty of tying

Second, other Bible writers **clearly point to a future for ethnic Israel also**. Stay there in Revelation 7 if you will, but let me jump over to **Romans 11. (11:11)**: The Apostle Paul here is talking about how the nation of Israel mostly rejected Jesus. Right? Jews, for the most part, did not embrace Jesus as their Messiah.

11 So I ask (Paul says), **did they stumble in order that they might fall?** (IOW, did their ‘stumble’ over Jesus mean they are permanently out of God’s plan?) **By no means!** Rather through their trespass (their initial rejection of Jesus) **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 (to acknowledge who Jesus was) means riches for the Gentiles, **how much more will their full inclusion mean!**

Israel’s rejection of the Messiah (their stumble), Paul says, actually opened the door for US, the Gentiles, to be saved (most of us in here are Gentiles, or non-Jews). You see, because Jews in the **1st 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. See them? And, Paul reasons (this is what is important): **If the Jewish people’s rejection of Jesus led to all THIS Gentile salvation, imagine what will happen when they embrace him?** God promised that ethnic Jews would be a blessing to the world. (That’s Genesis 12.) Paul reasons: Well, if they “blessed the world” even through their rejection, imagine what their embrace will lead to?

⁵ 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

That seems to point to the same thing John is talking about in Revelation 7. When these Jewish people embrace Jesus, it’s going to lead to the most massive revival the world has ever seen.⁵

One more place on this. Go to **Acts 1:6**. 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?”** So, you can see clearly here that after the resurrection, all the disciples still believe God has a plan in the future for the nation of Israel. After listening to Jesus, the greatest teacher EVER, teach about the Kingdom--*for 3 years*, including hearing him teach on it for 40 days after the resurrection--THEY still believe there is some role for ethnic Jews in God’s future plan.

So, when somebody tells me that the church has replaced Israel, and there is no more future for ethnic Jews in God’s plan, I want to say, respectfully, but “Really? After hearing Jesus teach about the Kingdom for 3 years, the disciples are still confused as to the basic nature of the Kingdom Jesus is sending them out to proclaim?”

But even more interesting than their question to me, is Jesus’ response to it. Notice, 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 times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power to be my witnesses...”** IOW, 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.

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)

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--this is an important caveat--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 saying the nation of Israel is part of God's future plans doesn't automatically mean becoming a part of the Zionist political movement. OK?)

And this leads me to our 2nd question (***You still with me? Listen, I've got some killer takeaways for you here at the end, but tighten your belt and put on your nerd glasses for about 7 more minutes, ok?***)

Second question: "Is this 'great tribulation' of 7:14 a literal period of time (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 7 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? When we all get

to heaven, Kirk Cameron and I will be very gracious with you; I promise I won't say, "I told you so." 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 the details and leave it to you to come to your own final conclusions.)

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, right now, in 2025, the beginning tremors of these things, like the early tremors before an earthquake, but there's a future intensification of them coming.

I showed you this the 1st 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 sharp crescendo and a head.

The other reason I believe that the tribulation is an actual 7 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:**⁶

(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 7--it could mean 7 days, or it could mean, as it does here, 7 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**. (You're like, "I had no idea we were going to be doing math this morning." Oh, just you wait!)

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."

(PUT UP CHART**)**⁷ That decree was given by King Artaxerxes of Persia around 445 B.C., a story told in Nehemiah 2. Starting at 445 BC, there will be 7 weeks (49 years, which is roughly how long they say it took to rebuild Jerusalem, and that will be followed by 62 more weeks.)

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..." **(**PUT BACK UP CHART**)** 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 B.C.**, (when Artaxerxes' issued the decree to rebuild Jerusalem) and go **483 years** in the future, that lands us at... **A.D. 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 32AD... 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 32 AD).

⁶ See sermon, ["It's All Part of the Plan: Dan 10-12,"](#) Daniel series from 2021.

⁷ See Bullpen

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 7 year rule it’s going to seem like everything is hunky dorry. But then, things will change, and all hell will break loose.

(PUT BACK UP CHART**)**The seven years of tribulation in Revelation is *Daniel’s 70th week*. Again, all theologians agree on that.

The question is when does the 70th week start and is it a literal 7 years or a symbolic 7 years? Is this just a symbolic number that indicates a time of trouble that we’re already in now, that started immediately after the resurrection; OR, does this point to a future, actual 7 years coming in the future--and there’s a (point to this on graph) gap of an unidentified amount of time between the end of the 69th week and the beginning of the 70th?

I read this as an actual 7-year period coming in the future because (a) the previous 69 weeks were basically literal, and (b) I think John presents it as something coming in the future--things that must soon take place.**

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 (opt: 2) 3 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 it all shakes out. OR, if you’re one of those people who say, “Look, pastor, 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, **this is the part I really want you to pay attention to**. These are the takeaways. (opt: 2) **3 things:**

1. Be Alert

Many commentators point out the similarity of the seal judgments in Revelation 6 with the things Jesus prophesied would happen on the earth in his **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, Mark 13, Jesus uses the word “alert” 7 times. **Mark 13:33**, “Be on guard! Be alert! (Everybody say, “**Be alert**.” If the person beside you looks like they are falling asleep, say, “Be alert.” ... Wow, I didn’t think it was that many; just 1 or 2! “Be alert, because...) **You do not know when that time will come.**”

These seal judgments, you see, show us that this present world is not our home, and Jesus tells us 7 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 a man's heart to this world. (If your life stinks--you're broke and everything hurts and nobody likes you—you've got no problem longing for heaven. But if your life is full? It's much easier to forget about it.)

LISTEN: **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), and, again, I will tell you from experience that that's HARD. Because here's the thing:

- The praises of people **feel real right now**. 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, I start *leaning* that direction, to try and get that praise again. But the life of faith says to 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 to 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. I know you don't want to say "Amen" to that but it's true. Like the country preacher says, "If sin ain't fun, you ain't doin' it right..."
- Riches and comforts feel real. (When I was SBC President and in charge of the Convention meeting, they put you up in the

Presidential Suite of the whole hotel because they have the whole thing rented out, and so my whole family checks into this room and it's just palatial--several rooms; everything is plush; looks out over the whole city, and my son, who was like 11 at the time, just starts running from room to room and checking it all out: "Dad, look at this; Dad, come look at THIS!" And after about 5 minutes of doing this he finally collapses on the bed and says, "Man, this is making it hard not to love EARTHLY things.")

- Amen. 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, you see, 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? Not physically, of course (only a few of us are built like this)—but is this your spiritual posture? 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.

(Cut) 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.⁸ **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—I started it to try to help me fall asleep, but then I got really interested and was staying up till 2am listening to episodes so I had to stop—but it's about about the explosion of Mt Vesuvius that destroyed Pompey back in the day (like, 79 AD, I think). 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 bad news: he hates you. He's in charge of media. He's in charge of entertainment. He's in charge of most government. You should never expect to be loved and appreciated by this world. If the world is praising you, you're not doing it right. If the Antichrist likes you, bad news. 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. The earthquakes, the natural disasters, illnesses, trials, the pain ... those are all judgments that affect us like anybody else.*

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."***

So be encouraged, it's just for a little while, but 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 brings me to the final thing we gain from this vision:

⁸ 1 John 4:3

3. Be Confident

Jesus wants us to see that when it's all said and done, this is what remains, and this vision shows us what we should be focusing on because it's what really matters.

That beach house you worked so hard to get--it's not going to be there. All those awards, those accolades--not there around the throne. What you see in this vision is what's going to be there, and that's what matters in life.

You see, **"Faith,"** I've heard it said, **"is living in a way now that one day 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**--2 young Moravians who, in the 1700's, became burdened to reach the inhabitants of one of the Caribbean islands, most of whom had been taken there as slaves. The 2 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 one enslaved among them. As word spread about their incredible sacrifice, Moravians from up and down the Eastern Coast of the U.S. 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 2 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 2 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. For 50 years they labored there; they prayed for these slaves; 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 wanna know why? 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. . ."*⁹ 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.

⁹ J. E. Hutton's History of the Moravian Church, Chapter 6. Repeated by Matt Papa in his song, "May the Lamb..."

Are you involved? Listen: Because these 2 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 you 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 2 men obeyed, 13,000 slaves came to Christ. ***What's going to happen when 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; the kid you faithfully brought to church each week; or the 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.

I've seen the end game. I know what that's going to be. 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).

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 that that was 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, “If 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. (BTW, 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.¹⁰)

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.

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... They are out there laboring, and when it comes, they’ll be like, “I knew it! I knew it would happen. Rev 7 assured me it would!”

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 I 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?**

¹⁰<https://www.imb.org/2022/02/08/imb-journeyman-uses-visits-park-plant-new-bible-study/>)

This weekend you'll get a **magnet**, as you leave (it's for your fridge; I don't want to see these all over 540 b/c you tried to put them on your car.). It lists out the 7 areas we're most involved with overseas and gives you a QR code you can scan to show you how to get involved, either GOING, GIVING, OR PRAYING. Your way of pursuing these things may not be selling yourself into slavery or going to South Asia (it might be) but he's calling ALL OF US to be involved, and I want to invite you to at least take the first step. This card will show you how.

I want every head bowed... Ask God, "How do you want me to be involved?" Just let him speak to you for a while, and then our worship teams will come.