

Hang on, Christian!

Revelation 21:1-7

700 years before Jesus' came, by means of Isaiah; God encouraged His people who were suffering as captives in a foreign land with His promise that heaven and earth would pass away with all its bondage to sin and decay. 700 years later, **Jesus** came, he taught his disciples who struggled under Roman rule, and persecution, that the sin-stained, heaven and earth **would pass away** when He returned on the last day. After Jesus' death and resurrection, St. Paul wrote in a letter to the Christians at Rome that at the end of time all creation would be restored to perfection just as God originally created it.

In today's second lesson written after Jesus ascended to heaven, we listen to John talk about the end of time. John, Jesus' only disciple who hasn't yet been executed for his commitment to Jesus, sits in a Roman prison on an island off the coast of what is today Turkey, because he won't worship king Nero. The Holy Spirit of God gives him a vision in which he somehow sees that the land and skies of the earth are transformed to a place where trees, and animals don't die, and nothing grows old, and everything gets along peacefully and the sea the symbol of all evil is gone.

How has your week been going? For some of you it is going very well. You are healthy, happy, and your problems are not worth considering. For some of you things aren't so good, but they could be worse. You're planning to keep running the race of life against all the things that drag you down and work to distract you. For some of you things look hopelessly dark. You are at the end of your rope and your grip is slipping.

The Holy Spirit who Jesus sent to us after he ascended to Heaven gave St. John the 6 visions of how all life will end up in order to comfort and encourage His suffering people of that time and of all time. No matter how bleak and hopeless our lives get, in the end the sufferings of this life won't compare to the glory that will be ours forever and ever!

From today's Gospel lesson v.13 we learn that Jesus promised that he wouldn't leave his people alone after ascending to Heaven but would send us His Holy Spirit to guide and lead us into all truth and declare to us the things that are to come."

God could have sent this revelation of 6 visions just to John to comfort him alone. After all John is now suffering the physical problems that come with the later years of life. He has seen all his best friends persecuted, and killed because they wouldn't stop telling their friends, neighbors, and others that Jesus was God's promised Messiah-Savior who died to pay for their sin and rose up victorious over all the powers of Satan, and of the world, and of death. God could have sent those 6 visions of victory just to John because he himself surely must have expected torture and death and needed God's encouragement. But Jesus wanted His brothers and sisters of all time to be strengthened and comforted because He instructed John to write them down. Listen to John in verse 5 telling us of Jesus' desire that he share the comforting visions with his people:

Revelation 21:5(ESV) And he who was seated on the throne (Jesus!) said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "**Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.**"

Like all the other disciples of Jesus, John had gathered people into groups to learn about Jesus' teachings, to pray for and with each other, to receive Jesus by means of Holy Communion, and to encourage and care for each other. John knew his people in the seven churches were also being blamed by their neighbors for being atheist because they refused to worship Nero as god. He

knew that the same kind of torture and death that Nero was doing to Christians in Rome were also happening to his people. He knew his people were at the end of their rope. No doubt some of them had family members arrested, tried, and taken to Rome where Nero had them sewn into the skins of wild beasts and placed in the coliseum for the crowds to watch as mad dogs attacked and chewed on them. He knew that some of their loved ones never came back home after being arrested and taken to Rome but others returned to tell them as one historian wrote:

Christian men and women, covered with pitch or oil or resin, and nailed to posts of pine, were lighted and burned as torches for the amusement of the mob; while Nero, in fantastical dress, featured himself in a horse race, and displayed his art as charioteer.

Jesus wanted those suffering brothers and sister, and all suffering followers of all time to see and know that in the end they would see better times that will never end. Jesus wants you to know that. You may not be suffering torture because of your commitment to Jesus today, but I know some of you are surrounded with darkness, and pain, without any signs your life will get easier. I know most people don't have quick painless deaths. Most of us will have our time of dark suffering and tears.

Here's proof that the Revelation was written for the comfort of persecuted, suffering Christians of John's day. Listen!

Revelation 17:1-6(ESV) ¹Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute (John uses sexual images and those were times of sexual immorality like we are seeing more and more, but when people and nations turn away from Jesus to chase after other joys and religions, they are **spiritual prostitutes**. The Roman Empire was made up of such people. Christians were a tiny minority group when John wrote the Revelation.) the great prostitute who is seated on many waters, ²with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, (other civil leaders followed the lead of the Romans) and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk." ³And he, the angel, carried me [John] away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman [He's talking about Nero and the leaders of the Roman empire] sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, (sitting on a lifestyle that mocks Jesus sacrifice and teaching) and it had seven heads and ten horns. ⁴The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality. ⁵And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: "Babylon the great, (that is code for Nero and Rome according to verse 14) mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations." ⁶**And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.**

Do you see that Jesus knew the suffering of his people in those days, and he knows your suffering too. For the people persecuted by the Romans whom John calls the city of Babylon, the Holy Spirit gives this encouragement in Revelation 18:2(ESV) And an angel called out with a mighty voice, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great." Without the Holy Spirit's guidance we see only the things that cause us to suffer, but God wants us to know and believe that all the forces that threaten your commitment to Jesus have been defeated by His death and resurrection! They are Babylon the great FALLEN FALLEN! Jesus is risen! Alleluia! He is risen indeed!

Don't think you are forgotten and unimportant to Jesus in your time of hard suffering! Listen how Jesus thinks about you who love Him: Revelation 21:2(ESV) And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

We who love Jesus are the opposite of unholy city of Babylon-Rome. We are the holy city, new Jerusalem! The city that belongs to Jesus! We are precious and honored by Jesus!

Listen how the Holy Spirit brings us into John's view. We are not rising up from below, but coming down from above, coming down out of heaven, coming down from God. Earth is not our eternal home, Heaven is!

Note how our appearance changes from the city of new Jerusalem, to that of the radiant bride dressed perfectly, looking just right, looking just righteous – for her husband who is the triune God. He married us when Jesus' death and resurrection removed the sin barrier that separated us from God.

Our bodies may be wrinkled and broken by suffering. Our souls may be scarred and smudged by all the faults, and foolish sinful things we have done, but Jesus transformed us into his beautiful bride when he gave his beautiful, holy, pure life in exchange for our broken ugliness.

Now if you are struggling to hang on to the end of your rope. Now if you have been trying to hold back the tears of your suffering to come to church today, then listen closely: Revelation 21:3-4(ESV) 3And I [John in his vision] heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself **will be with them as their God**. 4He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

Try to imagine God wiping your tears and holding you dear brothers and sisters who are suffering. It is too great to imagine, but it is so comforting! You know we had a member who was suffering a lot in his last days here, but over and over he would marvel at what it would be like to be with Jesus after death. He would quote 1 Corinthians 2:9(ESV) But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, ... God has prepared for those who love him."

You and I may have some hard suffering ahead, but it is defeated. It can't defeat us! Listen to these words Jesus had John write down for us: Revelation 21:6-7(ESV) And he [Jesus who is speaking from the throne of heaven] said to me [John], "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Jesus was here for the beginning, and at the end it won't be your suffer, or your guilt, or you hopelessness that gets the last word. It will be Jesus saying the same words he said before he died. "It is finished! Mission accomplished!

Until then Jesus assures us of the power of our baptism with these words, "To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. 7The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. You can hang on, because He hangs on to you! He hung on the cross for you!