

“When the Ordeal is Over”

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After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (Revelation 7:9-17)

One of the biggest mistakes you can make as a preacher is to talk too much about something you know little about. Another one is ticking women off on Mother’s Day. This being said, I will now boldly and recklessly risk making both of these grand mistakes this morning, as I say to you “Let’s talk a minute about childbirth.”

Just to establish that I am not completely insane, I will start with the obvious – the fact that I cannot speak first-hand about what childbirth is really like. In the beautiful drama of bringing life into the world, we men play only supportive roles. Many of us have been on the stage with you, but only in bit parts. You women take center stage in this production. You are the protagonists and heroines of this story.

So, I figure if I am going to dare to talk about the ordeal of childbirth, it would be wise to use the words of women who have had the experience themselves. Carol Burnett, for example, once said that “Giving birth is like taking your lower lip and forcing it over your head.”¹

As hard as it is, though, women also say that childbirth is a doorway to a wonderful new way of life. “The instant of birth is exquisite,” poet Madeline Tiger says. “Pain and joy are one at this moment. Ever after, the dim recollection is so sweet that we speak to our children with a gratitude they never understand.”² In other words, when the ordeal is over, childbirth opens the way to priceless blessings – not only a new life to cherish, but also a renovated heart, a new level of love, a new understanding of selflessness, and a new and stronger resolve. A parent begins to hear a new melody that is strangely known and familiar, even though it is just beginning to be written. “There should be a song for women

¹ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/childbirth>

² Steph Montgomery, “14 Quotes About Giving Birth That’ll Empower You,” <https://www.romper.com>, posted Oct, 24, 2018, accessed May 3, 2022.



to sing at this moment,” the novelist Anita Diamant once wrote, “or a prayer to recite. But perhaps there is none because there are no words strong enough to name that moment.”³

That is the essence of the story of those who are gathered around the throne of Christ in this vision given to John of Patmos. John sees “*a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.*” One of them turns to John and speaks directly to him.

“*Who are these robed in white?*” the elder asks. “*Who do you think we are, and how did we get here?*”

John does not know, so the elder answers his own question. “*These are they who have come out of the great ordeal,*” the white-robed elder says. The word “ordeal” can be translated in different ways, but none of the translations remove the sting of the challenge. Ordeal... persecution... affliction... distress... tribulation – any way you say it, those robed in white have been through the ringer and made it through to the other side.

It makes sense when we realize that one of the key terms in Revelation is the word “witness.” The pronunciation of the Greek word gives a hint at what is at stake, because that word is μάρτυς (*mar-toos*), from which we derive the English word “martyr.” Now, I don’t want to make too much of that word, because I happen to agree with Dr. Brian Blount who believes that Revelation is “interested not so much in creating a church of martyrs as... in encouraging a church filled with people committed to the ethical activity of witnessing to the lordship of Jesus Christ.”⁴ In other words, witnessing is not necessarily about dying for your faith. It is a matter of being willing to die for that witness if that is what it takes. In short, these elders robed in white that John saw around the throne of Christ did not all die on a cross, or under a hail of stones, or in the lion’s den. But they all were willing to endure that if they had to. They were all committed enough to their faith to stand up, say what they believed, and take whatever came as a result.

Here is an example of what I am talking about. On February 1, 1960, in my hometown of Greensboro, North Carolina, four students from North Carolina A&T State University -- Ezell Blair Jr., David Richmond, Franklin McCain and Joseph McNeil -- walked into a Woolworth’s drug store and took a seat at the lunch counter. Local Jim Crow laws forbade them to sit on those stools – they were expected to stay in the back, away from the white customers. But they did not accept the premise of those unjust laws. They did not believe that they were second class citizens. “I couldn’t live the lie,” Joe McNeil said. “We decided to take a stand.”

The witness they offered the world went far beyond mere words. They put their bodies on the line along with their principles. Their principles were rooted in their faith, their own faith, but just as equally the faith of their parents, who held fast to the notion that those who hold onto their faith and endure the ordeals of life will be rewarded by God. Based on their faith, they committed themselves to not return evil for evil or strike back in any way. Whatever they might endure, they promised each other that their responses would be non-violent. “At any time,” McNeil said, “we could have been carried out of that store in a pine box. We didn’t want to be martyrs, but we had to do what we needed to do.”⁵

³ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/1155893-just-as-there-is-no-warning-for-childbirth-there-is>

⁴ Brian Blount, *Revelation*, New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), emphasis added.

⁵ “Reflections on the Greensboro Lunch Counter,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFQ3ZCAgAA0>

That is the core principle of Revelation, which most would agree is a strange and often confounding series of visceral, even horrific images. Every person has an ordeal to endure – something that requires him or her to muster the courage to persevere – to stand up and bear witness to what we believe is right even if that means we have to suffer for that cause. I think we are all like Joe McNeil in this respect. We don't want to be martyrs, but we all have to do what we need to do. In the life of faith, not every hill is worth dying on, but all of us are expected to at least find a hill that could possibly be worth dying on, and then to make some sort of a faithful stand – to bear witness to God on that hill in some way, even if we have to suffer to do what needs to be done. I firmly believe that each of us has a calling to live out our faith in some way – some way that makes the world a better place – something that we need to do, even if it may make things much harder for us.

I will confess that I have always struggled with how to understand the relationship between suffering and faith. Suffering is not a good in itself. I do not believe that suffering for suffering's sake is something that God wants or expects. But it does seem that suffering – or at least the willingness to endure suffering if and when it comes – has often been a mark of true faith. In his letters to the Corinthians, Paul assured the faithful that afflictions and hardships offer a way for disciples to commend themselves to God and humans (6:4). In Romans, he goes as far as to say that we should rejoice and boast in our sufferings, because we know "that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope" (Romans 5:3-5). And we cannot deny that, in the central story of our faith, Christ was willing to endure the deepest kind of suffering out of love for us. He is THE example of what it means to stand up for love and take whatever pain may come in order to do what needed to be done. I cannot explain how or why suffering is related to faith any more than I can explain to you how a faithful witness' heavenly robe could be made gleaming, dazzling white by being washed "in the blood of the lamb." It is just one of those mysteries that we may not ever fully understand on this side of heaven.

If we can do that faithfully – if we can stand up, speak up, and hold on – if we can let our light shine even as the darkness rises up to resist – if we can persevere and endure to the end – then this vision of John describes the reward that awaits us when the ordeal is over. Around the throne of Christ, John saw a multitude that could not be counted – people from every nation and tribe and people. They were the people who had made it through, those who had "*come out of the great ordeal.*" Their ordeal, whatever it might have been, whatever it might have meant, whatever it might have cost them, is now over. Their pain is at an end, they are at peace, and their joy is now complete as they joyfully wave palm branches and sing a song of unending gratitude.

Today, we hold in our hearts those of you who are mothers who can understand a bit of the joy those elders robed in white are feeling... but we also remember those whose hearts have been broken by a desire that has not been realized... those who have desperately wanted to know both the joys and pains of motherhood but have been denied that gift for one reason or another. We remember people like the Greensboro Four who stood up by sitting down, witnesses who lived to see their sufferings bear fruit with changed laws and a changed nation... but we also remember those who are still dying at the hands of an unjust system – the George Floyds, Trayvon Martins, Breonna Taylors and countless others who have become involuntary martyrs in the cause of justice still to be realized. We also remember those who suffer for reasons that they cannot understand – pain that seems to have no value, no purpose.

As I said before, it is difficult, if not impossible, for us to understand the relationship between suffering and faith. I guess the only thing that can be said is that – no matter what suffering we may endure – no matter what good we may be able to see in it or not see in it – what seems impossible for us is always possible for God. Even when suffering makes no sense to us, God is always at work to redeem what is lost, to restore what is broken, to heal what is hurting, and to bring peace to those who sorrow. There is a hill every person must climb – a hill that our faith helps us to say is worth dying for, or at least standing up for. And whatever may happen to you on your hill – no matter what witness you are called to give and whatever may come of it you are given this faithful promise: that, when the ordeal is over, the One who is seated on the throne will shelter you... that you will hunger no more and thirst no more... that the Good Shepherd will call to you, and guide you the spring of the water of life... and God will wipe away every tear from your eyes.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. ***Amen.***