

The Great Ordeal – Teresa Blue Holden

Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

I would be very presumptuous if I suggested I had any expertise or knowledge of the book of Revelation. When I think about it though, I probably have about as much information about apocalyptic thought as any layman out there since during at least three periods in my lifetime, talk of the “end times” being imminent has been popular. When I was a child, I remember when Hal Lindsey’s book, *The Late, Great Planet Earth* came out, suggesting, I think, that the re-formation of Israel into a nation signaled the end times were approaching. I was a little young to understand all of this, but I knew enough to be frightened one day when I came home from school and couldn’t immediately find my mother (who happened to be napping, unbeknownst to me). I was convinced for a moment that she had been raptured, and I had been left to suffer through the Great Tribulation. Again at the turn of the 20th century, rumors circulated that Nostradamus had correctly predicted an apocalypse would occur in 1999, although now, I hear people think this really means 2012, because apparently Nostradamus was using the Mayan calendar. And, of course, within the past decade the *Left Behind* series of movies and books illustrates that I was not alone in my childhood fear, as these works depict a world in which the rapture has taken some and left others behind (hence the name).

While I really can’t comment on when or how this world will end, I find our passage today from Revelation to be a good starting off point, because it talks about something we can all relate to. That is the idea of difficulty, a trauma, or, as this translation calls it “an ordeal.” I’ve talked before about how I believe this life is a warm-up for the next; similarly, even if this passage is specifically talking about the Great Tribulation, or another apocalyptic event, I still think we can interpret it to be applicable to our current lives. We all go through ordeals, some of which aren’t little, but could be described or called as Revelation 7:14 does – “the Great Ordeal.” Sometimes, those ordeals are transformational. They provide us with new information about the nature of God, about just how personally involved God wants to be in our lives. Sometimes these ordeals give us new information about how very much God loves and cherishes us. Sometimes, our great ordeals give us new information about the centrality of the community of believers God has placed us in. We certainly see this to be true in the story of Tabitha.

In Acts 9, Tabitha’s story is, by necessity, told in the third person. We never gain access to Tabitha’s voice or her thoughts, but this makes sense, since, for over half the story, she is dead. Her friends, her community, are the ones who, in their grief, seek Peter. Peter, in turn, seeks God’s intervention.

This reminds me of the story of my student, Charles Gude. Charles is now a Senior, and he recently shared his testimony at a Vespers service at the college. I came to know him during his freshman year because he was a student in one of my classes. He had a really rough start to

his college career, as his mother died from cancer in the fall semester of his freshman year. That spring he was roommates with another of my students, Redgie Aaron. I was at a conference in Virginia when I received a call from Redgie. He told me that Charles was pretty sick, and he didn't know what to do. He said Charles had gone that day to see a doctor, and he had been told to wait a few days, and if he didn't get better, to come back, but Redgie was growing increasingly concerned because Charles was visibly getting worse by the hour. Ultimately, Redgie took Charles to another hospital where it was learned he had pneumonia, and he was admitted. After a few days despite the hospital's best treatments, Charles's health continued to deteriorate, and, they discovered he had a dangerous staph infection in one of his lungs. It was determined, finally, that the doctors were going to have to do some surgery to remove fluid from his lungs and provide more direct treatment. After they finished the procedure, of course it was time for the anesthesia to wear off, and they attempted to awaken Charles, but he wouldn't wake up.

When I heard Charles tell this story in Vespers, this is what he said – “I went into surgery, and then I didn't wake up, but after awhile I did, and I got out of the hospital, and so on.” I was sitting by Redgie at Vesper's and I looked at him, and we said, “that's not what happened – he doesn't really know what happened.” Similar to Tabitha, Charles was barely alive and completely unconscious to everything that took place between his not waking up and his waking up. I remember precisely where I was when Redgie called to tell me Charles hadn't awakened. He told me that the doctors had said that Charles's life was hanging in the balance and in the coming hours they would learn whether he was going to live or die. Immediately, most everyone I know stopped what they were doing and fervently prayed for Charles to live. If prayers emitted light, one would have been able to see lights turning on from St. Louis east to Decatur (where Charles is from), with a bright concentration at Greenville. He did finally wake up, and for those of us who lived through those events with him, we will always know God has a very special purpose for Charles's life. What I learned from his Vespers testimony is that it took Charles a little while to know this for himself. He had been so discouraged by the loss of his mother and so angry with God, and he was in so much pain, both physical and emotional, that lying there in the hospital, he had lost the will to live. It was months later through another experience that he received reassurance that God had walked with him through that great ordeal. For a brief time, Charles's community of believers had stood in the gap for him, not only asking for his life to be spared, but also supporting him in ways that he wasn't always aware of.

That's the nature of life, sometimes through great ordeals we feel completely alone. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the famous suffragist described this condition vividly in her testimony before the Judicial Committee of Congress in 1892, that has since been entitled, “The Solitude of Self.” Stanton was advocating on behalf of women's rights, and her rationale was this: since life is a solitary condition, no other person experiences it's difficulties for another, and all must be equipped as best they can to face their own individual circumstances. Sometimes all of us, regardless of gender, feel as Stanton described. She said:

'To appreciate the importance of fitting every human soul for independent action, think for a moment of the immeasurable solitude of self. We come into the world alone, unlike all who have gone before us; we leave it alone under circumstances peculiar to ourselves. . . . When death sunders our nearest ties, alone we sit in the shadows of our affliction. Alike mid the greatest triumphs and darkest tragedies of life we walk alone. We realize the awful solitude of individual life, its pains, its penalties, its responsibilities. . . ."

Stanton speaks to the individuality of every person, and that's where we live, trying to get through our own private ordeals alone, until or unless we reach out to God and our community and become like that most humble of animals, sheep.

I understand sheep aren't so interested in individuality; they prefer to be part of a group that is led by a trustworthy Shepherd. This metaphor that describes believers as sheep and Jesus as the Shepherd permeates today's Scriptures and helps us to understand the level of compassion and care God has for us. Today's Scriptures give us tangible examples of what God does for us as our Shepherd. Jesus says that He is recognizable to believers, and that He is protective and capable of keeping enemies from snatching us away. Revelation tells us that God shelters, feeds, provides life-sustaining water to us, and wipes away our tears. Psalm 23 says that God provides restoration to our souls, leads us in the right direction and gives us courage.

This can sound like just a list of things, and we are rather unaware of all the ways God provides for us until or unless we are in the midst of our Great Ordeal. C. S. Lewis illustrated in his book entitled, *Miracles*, ways in which we are unaware of our supernatural God in our daily lives. He said:

'When you are looking at a garden from a room upstairs it is obvious (once you think about it) that you are looking through a window. But if it is the garden that interests you, you may look at it for a long time without thinking of the window. When you are reading a book it is obvious (once you attend to it) that you are using your eyes: but unless your eyes begin to hurt you, or the book is a text book on optics you may read all evening without once thinking of eyes . . . These instances show that the fact which is in one respect the most obvious and primary fact, and through which alone you have access to all the other facts may be precisely the one that is most easily forgotten – forgotten not because it is so remote or abstruse but because it is so near and obvious."

We're not always looking for the ways God is protecting and guiding us and feeding our souls, but it's happening even when we're not looking. I haven't always been fully aware of this in my own life, but during one of my Great Ordeals, I gained a vivid understanding of the immediacy of God's presence. On January 17, 1994, Dave and the girls and I were living in the Los Angeles area (our son, David, wasn't born, yet) when a 6.7 earthquake reverberated through southern California. The epicenter was about 10 miles, as the crow flies, from our house, and the Santa Clarita Valley, where we lived, was amongst the most severely affected areas.

We spent the first day after the quake trying to clean up glass and all sorts of debris that had crashed on our floors. Most everything from our refrigerator had dumped onto the floor, eggs and milk and all sorts of things on our kitchen carpet. We were without electricity on that first day, and we were without water for an entire week, but we were so blessed in so many ways – our house had no structural damage (as opposed to the two houses at the end of our cul-de-sac that were both severely damaged and uninhabitable for over two years), nothing had fallen on our car in the garage, so we could still drive it (unlike some of our neighbors), and we had family and friends in the area who let us come to their houses to do laundry and take showers.

Nevertheless, I was totally blind to all of our blessings, because from the moment the earthquake struck I became filled with an overwhelming surge of maternal protectiveness. The girls were very young – Lindsey was about to turn 3, and Ashley was ten months old – and I was completely unnerved by media reports that reminded us all that something worse could happen at any moment. In southern California, everyone is familiar with the seismologists from Cal Tech, at the time it was Lucy Jones, who on radio and TV brings doomsday reports. After the earthquake, Lucy Jones told us that this 6.7 quake could really be a precursor to an even bigger quake. There was no way of knowing, we would just have to wait and see.

To make matters worse, just a couple of miles from our house the 5 Freeway had collapsed, so that what previously had been about a 35 minute commute for Dave to go to work became an hours long commute on the Old Road, which only accommodated two way traffic. Again, we were blessed because a light rail line had just been completed linking our Valley with Glendale where Dave's work was, so he could take the train and then walk to work. But because of Dave's work schedule it was necessary for me to take him to catch the first train at 5:00 am. So, until the freeway was fixed, we would put the girls in the car at 4:40 or so, and head to the train station. When the girls and I returned to our house at about 5:20, it was dark. I was so terrified that a worse quake would hit, and I would somehow be separated from them, that I would put them in sleeping bags under our kitchen table, so that I could get some work done.

Dave's family was so dear to us, but I thought they all acted like they were living in some alternative universe, as they didn't seem too bothered by this quake or the threat of future quakes. Native Californians, they took the whole thing in stride, and they could actually laugh and smile and act like everything was normal, while I was consumed by my fear and concerns for my children. Dave was gone for long hours, and I felt so alone. As the first week wore along, I became increasingly exhausted, as well.

In the evenings when the girls and I would go back to the train station to pick up Dave, I taught Lindsey the 23rd Psalm. Ashley would usually sleep. I would say each line of the Psalm, and Lindsey would repeat it after me, and this helped me to feel calmer.

When we finally got to Friday of that first week, I was so relieved to have a weekend. Dave put the girls to bed, while I laid down on the couch in our living room. Our living room had high vaulted ceilings, and facing me, across the room, were high windows that followed the roof line

down on either side of our chimney. Lying there, I fell asleep, and when I woke up I was looking up at the windows, and I could see the profiles of neon figures busily hovering outside the window. I could hear them speaking to each other – they were saying things like, “did you check the garage? – yes, and also the back of the house?” I could see that these were angels, taking care of my house and my family, and I immediately felt a deep peace roll over me – I knew that God was taking care of us, and we were going to be okay.

Believe me, I know people tend to be skeptical of these experiences because for a long time, this was my two daughters’ favorite story. Whenever they made new friends, they would bring them to me and insist that I tell them the story of seeing the angels outside our window. Children always accepted this story with full faith and wonder, but when they would run to tell their parents, I could see the skepticism.

I don’t know why this happened to me. I suspect that throughout the world in moments of deep crisis these kinds of things happen to believers, and maybe nonbelievers – we just never hear about them. For me, I believe God allowed me to see what C. S. Lewis would call an obvious fact, that Jesus has a mega-view of our lives and cares for us as a Shepherd in tangible ways even when we’re not aware of His presence. It’s not hard for me to imagine the scene in Revelation 7: “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.”