

Reasons To Remain Steadfast

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Text

15:1 And I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous: seven angels having the seven last plagues—in them the fury of God is completed. 2 And I saw as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire, and those who prevailed over the Beast and over his image and over the number of his name, standing on the glassy sea, having harps of God.

Introduction

Over the past 15 chapters we have seen both the good and the bad sides of life. And I would like to compare what we have been looking at to sand. Sand on the beach can be kind of nice - until you get it in your shoes, your hair, and under your finger nails, and the kids track it into every nook and cranny of your car and home. Then sand can be irritating. After a day on the beach you have to vacuum and there is grit in the bathtub. And I never seem to be able to shake all the grains of sand out of my shoes. So it is easy for the remaining sand to become an irritant. And sand does not make a very good foundation, does it? It is unstable, shifts underfoot, and does not give good support. Now, don't get me wrong - I love digging my toes into sand, and building sand castles on the beach. That is a lot fun. Even as an adult I enjoy making sand castles. But their beauty will not last long. The waves can make them disappear within twenty four hours. And I think that is a perfect image of what life down here below can be like - a mix of pleasure and irritation. And sometimes we wonder whether all of our efforts down here below will last, or if they will be washed away like the sandcastles at the beach.

Well, it can last, but only through Christ. In verse 2 we have a sea of glass mingled with fire. When you heat up sand, you get very useful, very durable, and very beautiful glass. I watched a video one time where they melted sanded and step by step turned it into beautiful glass. Back in 1945 the government set off the Trinity nuclear bomb in the New Mexico desert, and the explosion turned the sand in the immediate area into a pool of glass. Glass is sand that is transformed by heat. The heat part is not fun. But our Master Craftsman, Jesus Christ, is making all things new in His new creation, and this is just one of many images of the glory of this newness that is invading earth. Eventually all of earth will conform to the image of heaven.

I. The new section (chapters 15-16) begins with another blessed reprieve - a sign (v. 1)

Verse 1 says, "And I saw another sign in heaven..." Sprinkled through this book are these refreshing visions that encourage us and that give us reasons to remain steadfast in the face of tough times. And when you get discouraged, you really need to take your eyes off of the discouraging events for a few minutes and focus on God's promises, or focus on heaven, or focus on God's descriptions of the victory of His kingdom, or focus on the sufficiency of His grace for your problem. I don't know how many times my spirits have been lifted by looking to Scripture. Scripture acts like eye-glasses that help us to see straight and to not stumble.

II. Seeing the resources of heaven as "great and marvelous" (v. 1b) can give us faith to face the awful things of earth.

And when John looked at this inspired vision from God, he said that the sign in heaven was "great and marvelous." He already knew how great the opposition on earth was, but this vision reminded him that God's provision was great and marvelous. Anything that is great and marvelous will lift your spirits.

And I have frequently had to rebuke myself when I found myself getting discouraged, and tell myself, "No, Phil! You are not going to let discouragement kill your faith. Focus on God and His promises. Thank God for all that He has done and has promised to do." And then I would begin to do so. And I have immediately found my discouragement evaporating. I can relate to people who easily get discouraged. But I still admonish you to get rid of your discouragement just as I admonish myself to do so.

You may not think of discouragement as a sin, but I do. I take it seriously. Let me give you William Ward's reasons for why discouragement must be instantly cast behind our backs with an upward glance at God. Never nurse discouragement; let it go. William Ward said,

Discouragement is dissatisfaction with the past, distaste for the present, and distrust of the future. It is ingratitude for the blessings of yesterday, indifference to the opportunities of today, and insecurity regarding strength for tomorrow. It is unawareness of the presence of beauty, unconcern for the needs of our fellowman, and unbelief in the promises of old. It is impatience with time, immaturity of thought, and impoliteness to God.¹

Wow! After reading that analysis of discouragement, I have never been able

¹ William Ward, as quoted in *Today in the Word*, April, 1989, p. 18.

to look at discouragement the same way. I used to think that I had a right to be discouraged, but I have come to regard discouragement as an enemy that must be destroyed by faith immediately. So before I give some of this passage's antidotes to discouragement, let me read his analysis again. He said,

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III. When you get discouraged or when you think that God does not care:

So when you get discouraged or when you think that God does not care, remember seven things from this passage. And these are obviously just seven of hundreds of things that you can remind yourself of. But I am going to go through them as an exercise to show you how I handle discouragement.

A. Remember that the discouraging world you can see with your eyes is not all that exists - God has angels on our side (v. 1c)

First, remember that the visible world is not the only world that there is. John looks at this inspired vision and he sees what? He sees "seven angels." And this is not the first time that angels are mentioned in this book. They are mentioned some seventy times. And from previous chapters we get the impression that some of these angels are leaders of armies of angels. There is a whole world of angels who minister to us and who fight against Satan's kingdom.

And the reason this bit of theology is important is that we generally tend to get discouraged by what we are able to see with just our physical eyes. And in America, what we can see around us ain't too pretty. It is easy to get overwhelmed like Elisha's servant got overwhelmed with the circumstances he found himself in. You remember that story, right? Elisha and his servant were surrounded by the armies of the enemy who had come to capture them. And the servant was really stressed out. So Elisha said, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." (2 Kings 6:16). And the servant looks at Elisha with incredulity and thinks Elisha is crazy because he is only evaluating life by what his five senses. In contrast,

Elisha knew by faith that God's angels were there to help them and that those angels vastly outnumbered the fallen angels in Satan's kingdom. His servant was discouraged because he didn't know that. The moment his eyes were opened to see the myriads of angels and fiery angelic horses camped all around him, it gave him faith. It completely evaporated his discouragement. What made the difference? The angels had already been there before. There was no change in their reality. The difference was made when he realized they were there and that these angels could take on anything that came their way.

And you might think, "That's fine for him. I wouldn't be discouraged either if I had a vision like that." But that's the whole point of Scripture, isn't it? It is the recorded visions of prophets. It's designed to give us faith and remove our discouragement just as much as that servant's vision gave him faith and removed his discouragement. In fact, 2Peter says that the Scriptures we possess are far better than any vision in doing that. In 2Peter 1:16-21 Peter talks about the glorious vision that three of them had on the mount of Transfiguration and the voice they heard from heaven, but then goes on to say that we have a more sure word of prophecy in the Scripture. He was pointing out that we don't need visions if we have the Bible. The Bible contains the promises of a God who cannot lie. Peter was telling people not to envy his visions since we have a more sure word of prophecy in Scripture.

And I find it incredibly encouraging to know from the Bible (without a shadow of a doubt) that God has sent angels to minister to those who are heirs of salvation (Heb. 1:14). That's you and me. I find it incredibly encouraging to know that good angels outnumber bad angels two to one. I find it incredibly encouraging to know that God has given each one of my grandchildren at least one angel. Reminding myself of the doctrine of angels has helped my discouragement many times because they even out the playing field and give me perspective.

B. Remember that the enemy's days are numbered (v. 1d)

Second, when you are tempted to get discouraged, remember that the enemy's days are numbered. Revelation has already told us about the seven trumpet judgments against the church's persecutors in history, but this chapter and chapter 16 are going to introduce us to seven more angels "having the seven last plagues." These are going to be the last plagues in that generation. There is an end to God's patience and an end to humanism in various societies. In the New Covenant God does not allow the humanists to dominate forever. Israel's days of persecution were numbered. Rome's days

of persecution were numbered. God does not allow evil to triumph indefinitely when the church exercises a victorious faith. We are going to be seeing that faith is key. As long as the church fails to exercise faith, they will not have a remedy for discouragement.

C. Remember that God's fury shows that God does care and is motivated (v. 1e)

Third, when you are tempted to get discouraged at the evil around you, remember that God's fury shows that God is far more upset with the evil in our society than you are. One of the temptations to discouragement is the false thinking that God does not care. Have you ever been tempted to think that God does not care? I have. I know it's not true, but emotionally I have been tempted to think that He does not care. But verse 1 shows that He cares a lot. Verse 1 goes on to say, "in them the fury of God is completed." That was reminding John that God was far more furious about the evil in the world than John had ever been.

And to me that is encouraging. I don't need to motivate God with my prayers. He is already very motivated to deal with evil. He is stirring up the church to align their attitudes with God's attitudes. And until the church does so, we continue to suffer.

Psalms 73 is very instructive on this account. The author, Asaph, knew that God was good to those who are pure of heart (verse 1), but he goes on to say in the next verses that he almost stumbled because he got envious of the good life that the wicked had and he got very discouraged at how life didn't seem fair. In verses 13-14 he was tempted to give up because it just didn't seem worth fighting for. In the next three verses he said,

Psa. 73:15 If I had said, "I will speak thus," Behold, I would have been untrue to the generation of Your children. Psa. 73:16 When I thought how to understand this, It was too painful for me— Psa. 73:17 Until I went into the sanctuary of God; Then I understood their end.

And he goes on to describe how listening to God's word enabled him to really believe that the wicked have it bad in time and in eternity and that the righteous have it good in time and in eternity. Looking at the vision of Scripture changed his perspective and gave him faith. And Asaph gives repeated examples of how God judges evil men in time and in eternity in response to the prayers of God's people.

The bottom line is that God cares; God is motivated; God is furious over abortion in America. And if the church will wake up and once again put their faith in Him, God will be willing to send His angels to advance Christ's

kingdom in America. We cannot pit God's sovereignty over against our responsibility. We cannot pit God's caring over against the church's need to care. God withdraws for periods to stir up the church to care.

D. Remind yourself that God is on His throne (v. 2a with v. 3 and Exodus 24)

Next, when you are discouraged, remind yourself that God is on His throne. Verse 2 says, "And I saw as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire..." He doesn't describe it in depth because he had already done so in chapters 4-5. This sea of glass is God's throne room. It's the same sea of glass that Moses saw in Exodus 24 - a vision that reminded Moses that God was totally on His throne. And that's why verse 3 of our chapter here will have the saints sing the song of Moses in adoration. It's connecting this passage with Exodus 24. They too are convinced that God is on His throne.

I want to devote a whole sermon to that song of Moses next week, but what an encouraging thing it is to know your eschatology and to know that Jesus is ruling the nations right now with a rod of iron. He is not ignoring what they are doing. But as Revelation chapter 2 insists, He wants the church to have faith in His kingship, to sit with Christ in the heavenlies, to be overcomers. And when we are overcomers, chapter 2 promises that we too can wield that rod of iron that is in Christ's hands.

The whole point of going through the book of Revelation is to increase your faith in Christ's present kingship. A victorious eschatology is the only thing that is going to give the modern church a victorious faith, and Revelation guarantees that without a victorious faith we cannot expect victory. So cast off your discouragement and remind yourself that Christ is on the throne. Value the Postmillennial eschatology of this church. It is a remedy for discouragement.

E. Remind yourself that even martyrs are more than conquerors (v. 2b)

Next, remind yourself that even martyrs are more than conquerors. Even martyrdom should not discourage us. They were conquerors in life and they were conquerors in death. Verse 2 goes on, "and those who prevailed [and the word there is "were victorious"] over the Beast and over his image and over the number of his name..." Many people believe this is describing martyrs in heaven, yet John says that they were victorious over the beast. How can they be victorious when the beast successfully killed them?

1 Corinthians 15 says that it is because with the resurrection of Jesus Christ and with His being seated at the right hand of the Father that God guarantees that our labors in the Lord are not in vain. Everything we do in life (if it is done in faith) accomplishes the advancement of heaven to earth. And even our death is used by God to advance Christ's kingdom. I love the way that Romans 8 ends. Let me read verses 31-39 to you because it expands on this point and gives reason after reason why we should not be discouraged.

Rom. 8:31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? Rom. 8:32 He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Rom. 8:33 Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Rom. 8:34 Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Rom. 8:35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Rom. 8:36 As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." Rom. 8:37 Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. Rom. 8:38 For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, Rom. 8:39 nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

When you are being opposed, remind yourself that you are more than conquerors through Christ. In 2 Corinthians 2:14 Paul said, "Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place." Remind yourself that even if you die as a martyr, God guarantees that your death will not be vain. Satan is the one that should be discouraged because bit by bit we are defeating his kingdom.

F. Remind yourself that we have a glorious destiny (v. 2c)

Next, remind yourself that we have a glorious destiny. Speaking of these martyrs in heaven, it says they were "standing on the glassy sea" or the sea of glass. Not just in front of it, but on it. The sand of their life has been transformed into glass; beautiful glass; glass that will last for eternity; glass that will bring forth glory to God for eternity.

And the fact that they are standing on the glass means that they have joined Christ in God's throne room. As other portions of Revelation remind us, they are ruling with Christ as victors. In fact, there are many commentators who believe that this is describing even overcomers who are still alive. Though it includes martyrs, verse 2 says that it is all who are overcomers who stand on this sea. Well, earlier in Revelation it describes even some on earth who are overcomers.

But either way, it means that no matter how discouraging events on earth might be, heaven makes it worth it all. And meditating on our heavenly heritage can sometimes lift our spirits and give us renewed energy to keep on keeping on.

But certainly, being convinced that we are already seated with Christ in the heavenlies and are already ruling with Him can enable us to pray with authority and pray with faith. I will have to admit that not as many of my prayers are prayed with the authority of one seated with Christ, but having experienced that faith and authority in prayer makes me long to have more of it. It can enable us to do our work from a heavenly perspective. When you get to the place where you can see yourself with Christ in the throne room, it can be a remedy for discouragement.

G. Remind yourself that sorrow will be replaced with eternal joy (v. 2d)

Lastly, remind yourself that the sorrows of earth will be replaced with the joys of heaven. That is already symbolized by the sea of glass purified by fire, but it is also symbolized by the last phrase of verse 2 - they are "having harps of God." Harps were symbols of worship, praise, adoration, and joy. And the next verses will give fuller expression to the incredible joy that they have.

But no matter how sad events on earth might make me feel, I buoy my spirits with the reminder that God has stored up for His saints pleasures forevermore in His presence. These sufferings are not worth comparing with the glories that are stored up for us. Scripture says that in His presence is fullness of joy.

And by the way, we get down-payments of that joy right now while we are on earth. We can experience His presence. And if we experience His presence, in His presence is fullness of joy. The whole point of this book is to show the advance of heaven's invasion of earth, and part of that invasion is experiencing God's presence and joy in our own lives right now.

Of course, God sometimes allows outward circumstances to be such that without faith and focus we lose our joy. And most of us have lost our joy at some point. During those times He wants us to fight for joy. And these seven steps have helped me numerous times to re-find my joy in the Lord. Of course, there are many other ways in which we can do so, such as forcing ourselves into the Scriptures, into worship, into thankfulness, into meditation. Spiritual disciplines can fan the tiny embers within us into fuller

joy, but at least these seven steps can get you started.

Conclusion

So brothers and sisters, if the sand in your life brings more pain than pleasure, ask Christ to turn that sand into beautiful glass that will last for eternity. Ask Christ to help you to respond to the refining fires in faith and to bring glory to His name as He turns the sand into glass. Ask Him to invade your life with His heavenly kingdom as you pray, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Amen.