

**13 Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?” 14 I answered, “Sir, you know.” And he said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 15 Therefore, “they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. 16 ‘Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,’ nor any scorching heat. 17 For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; ‘he will lead them to springs of living water.’ ‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’**

My brothers and my sisters in Christ Jesus, apart from the first years of our lives, we get caught trying to avoid, at all costs, being a crybaby. We hold that tears are things we can and should keep at bay. We tend to associate maturity with invulnerability. We think it a fact that a strong person is one who cannot be brought to tears.

But, then, there are those moments of unambiguous tragedy that can bring even a man with a face chiseled from stone to twist and break down crying. Those moments of tragedy, of a man we knew for so long reduced to a box this big and no bigger, and that’s all that’s left of him. A natural disaster causes unimaginable pain, and war causes destruction unseen, but we still find ourselves fighting a battle against those tears. As the waters begin to flow, you know it’s more than just water simply leaking from the eyes. It’s the war that is deep in the throat with pain as you try to fight it back. The clenching of the jaw as you try not to let it get the best of you. Quickly sniffing away any signs of sadness, but you just can’t win.

And as the powerful emotion bursts forth physically for all to see. The pain has weaseled out for the world to see. And still, we fight it every time. Saying to ourselves: “This is strength, I need to show I am strong, I need to show that I am normal.”

But in the end, ‘normal’ really isn’t anything that makes it easier to hold back tears. In the book of Revelation, the apostle John is shown what is so typical in our world, and nothing really strengthens us in our futile battle with tears. We find ourselves in the visions of the seven seals, and as those seals are opened, normalcy is nothing that makes us feel better. As standard on this earth is symbolized in pictures that show the true horror of sin that is all too common.

There is the red horse who comes out, and it takes peace from the earth and makes people kill each other. There is the black horse who comes out and brings famine and scarcity. Then, the pale horse brings death itself. As the fifth seal is opened, those having been killed for the Gospel cry out, how much longer is this going to continue? The earth opens, and there is an earthquake; the sun goes dark, the stars fall, and heaven itself is ripped apart.

This is what life is like on a sin-filled earth. Forces and hardships that you know well. We often think of these things as exceptional and not expected. But in all reality, this is what we call normal. You know its pains well, don't you? You know what it's like to face the scarcity that comes from too much month at the end of the money. You know how hard it is to see people of the earth taking the lives of one another for reasons beyond your comprehension. You know what it's like to walk up and see someone you knew, cared about, and loved close their eyes, never to open again. These are things that are powerful and painful, powerful and painful, enough to bring even the very son of God down into tears as he weeps over the grave of his friend Lazarus.

But it's not just those things, those tragedies, that can bring those tears. It is the perpetual grinding of sin as well. Day after day of unobstructed meanness. The unrestrained horribleness of it all. The energy expended constantly to fend off awful feelings. The constant pains of falling into sins, new and oh-so-familiar vices time and time again, causing pain and loss for others, let alone remembering how far away this takes me from God. Let alone remembering how much God has expected of me and seeing how far from that I remain—and having to wake up over and over again to face it on every new day. And you look and break down in tears and say it is all just awful, it's a tragedy around me, it's a tragedy within me. You see the commonality of unambiguous tragedy and the constancy of elements that go horribly wrong every hour, and it's hard not to break down in tears and just sob uncontrollably. It's almost a wonder in and of itself that the world isn't just billions of people sitting in the corner with their heads in their hands weeping.

But there is a solace in this world of pain. And it couldn't be more different than what we experience here. After the views of the terrible, John is shown a vision of one experiencing something else in heaven: **“They are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. ‘Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,’ nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; ‘he will lead them to springs of living water.’**

John sees a view of heaven. And it's a place that is so extraordinary that it's hard to even describe it using human language as it's things we have never experienced. Not only are those tragedies notably absent: murder, famine, death, and the grave. But even those tiny, innumerable struggles are gone. No more hunger and thirst. No more discomfort from heat and cold. God himself will be there in their presence, and God's own presence shelters them. All that is left for those there is to sing, and to praise, to bring glory and honor to God.

But in this vision, the focus is not so much on the place but on the people. **“These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?”** The elder comes down and asks John a question. It’s not about the elders in the throne room; it’s not about the angels there; it’s not about the four living creatures; it’s not even about God who sits on his throne. God wants John to focus on the people there. God says look, look at those in the white robes! Look at the blessings that are theirs! Look at the people who are just like you, who have suffered on this earth, but now look at them! Shining bright and glorious without a stain on them. Look at them in the white robes, people like you who have seen this world’s pain and now are far away from it. Look at those people, rejoicing, praising, pure, and holy in the presence of God himself.

Why focus on them? It’s because they are what you will be. And how did these people become so glorious, so full of peace, so far away from sin, and so close to God? How did they get their robes so white? Where did they find the clothes needed to enter heaven? Well, by some miracle, they came in wearing the robes they already had on. **“These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”** Those saints, those blessed people, came in with the robes they already had on. They had dirty robes, but the blood of Jesus made them clean. Those robes that they had, marred by violence, tattered by hardships, stained with sin, and soaked with tears, Jesus took those robes and washed them. He cleansed them. He purified them, perfect and holy.

One by one, through his work through the means of grace, through the work of the Gospel, God continues to take dirty robes and wash them white. Soaking them in his perfect blood so they can stand in his presence for all of eternity. And day after day, more of them come streaming in, robe gleaming, to join the chorus with all the others that God has washed.

In this world of tribulation, the battle with tears will continue to rage. You will have to fight back the tears of tragedy. You will have to endure the daily hardships that make you want to break down in tears. But oh, what a joy for you, Christian. Because one day, sooner or later, you will open your eyes to God himself. Encircled by angel hosts and saints triumphant, dressed in a robe of dazzling white, washed by Jesus’ blood. And on that day, there may be one tear. But no more. A final tear will roll down the cheek, and God will wipe it away. And then there will be no more. The time for tears is over. Amen.