FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ESCHATOLOGY

The Doctrine of Last Things

He Who Was, and Who Is, and Who Is to Come

UNIT 3: THE KINGDOM OF GOD — ALREADY AND NOT YET

Lessons 7–9: The Reign of Christ Between the Two Comings

Lesson 8

THE KINGDOM NOT YET

Tribulation, Perseverance, and the Shape of the Inter-Advent Age

The Not-Yet Dimensions of the Kingdom and the Church's Vocation in the Tension Between the Ages

"The kingdom has arrived, but it has not yet conquered every enemy. The age between is the age of the church's suffering — and its glory."

Key Texts: John 16:33; Romans 8:18–25; 2 Timothy 3:1–5, 12; Matthew 24:9–14; 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12; 1 Peter 4:12–17; Revelation 12:10–12

> *"Looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus."*
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> **Titus 2:13, NASB 1995**

Dr. Joshua Nichols

Pastor, Theologian, Author

faithfultotheword.com

Introduction

Lesson 7 made the exegetical case, from Mark 1:14–15, Matthew 12:28, Luke 4:16–21, Daniel 7:13–14, and Colossians 1:13–14, that the kingdom of God has genuinely, really, and presently arrived in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The king has come. The kingdom has been inaugurated. The transfer has been accomplished. Citizens of the kingdom live in the age of its arrival, empowered by the Spirit of the age to come, and commissioned by the ascended King whose authority over all things is already comprehensive. If Lesson 7 was the lesson of the "already," Lesson 8 is the lesson of the "not yet", and both are equally necessary for a biblically faithful account of the present age.

The not-yet dimensions of the kingdom are not a qualification of the already or a retreat from its claims. They are the other half of the eschatological reality in which the church lives. The kingdom has arrived, but it has not yet conquered every enemy. The King reigns, but not yet from an earth where every knee has bowed. The powers of darkness have been decisively defeated, but they have not yet been finally abolished. The resurrection age has broken in, but the resurrection has not yet occurred for those who are still dying. The Spirit has been poured out, but the groaning of creation continues. This is the texture of the inter-advent age, and it is a texture that the New Testament describes with unflinching honesty: an age of genuine kingdom presence and genuine kingdom conflict, of real eschatological blessing and real eschatological suffering, of the already of victory and the not-yet of consummation held in productive and sometimes painful tension.

This lesson examines the not-yet dimensions of the kingdom under seven headings: the explicit promise of tribulation in the world made by Jesus Himself (John 16:33); the comprehensive groaning of creation, the Spirit, and the believer in Romans 8:18–25; the New Testament's consistent expectation of apostasy, moral declension, and persecution characterizing the latter days of the inter-advent age (2 Timothy 3:1–5, 12; Matthew 24:9–14); the mystery of lawlessness and the restrainer in 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12; the biblical theology of suffering as the church's vocation in the inter-advent age (1 Peter 4:12–17); the cosmic dimension of the inter-advent conflict in Revelation 12:10–12; and the posture of patient endurance and eschatological hope that the not-yet demands of the community that inhabits it. Together these passages paint a portrait of the inter-advent age that is neither triumphalist nor defeatist, neither naive about the ongoing power of evil nor despairing about the outcome of the conflict. It is the portrait of a community that knows it has already won the decisive battle and that fights on with confidence toward the final victory that the returning King will secure.

A pastoral word is necessary at the outset of this lesson, because the not-yet dimensions of the kingdom have a way of landing on those who are currently in the deepest experience of them. There are people in every congregation who are suffering, suffering illness, persecution, loss, spiritual attack, and the grinding sense that the kingdom's arrival has not changed the basic conditions of their daily lives. For those people, the doctrine of inaugurated eschatology can feel like a taunt: the king has come, but my cancer is still here; the kingdom has arrived, but my marriage is still broken; the Spirit has been poured out, but I cannot sense His presence. This lesson does not dismiss that experience. It takes it seriously, grounds it in the New Testament's own unflinching account of the inter-advent age, and offers the specific eschatological resource that the suffering church has always found most sustaining: not the promise that the suffering will end soon, but the certainty that the One who already won the decisive battle is coming to finish what He has already started, and that in the meantime, nothing in the present suffering is being wasted.

I. TRIBULATION IN THE WORLD, JOHN 16:33

The King's Promise That the Church Will Suffer

A. In the World You Will Have Tribulation

The most direct and most unqualified promise Jesus makes to His disciples about the character of the present age is found in John 16:33: "These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world." The statement is deceptively simple and profoundly consequential. Jesus does not say that His disciples may encounter tribulation as an unwelcome possibility, or that tribulation will afflict some of them under certain historical conditions. He says "you have tribulation", present indicative, unqualified, universal for those who are in the world as His disciples. Tribulation is not an aberration from the normal Christian experience; it is a constitutive feature of life in the world as a disciple of the One whom the world rejected.

The word translated "tribulation" (thlipsis) is one of the most theologically loaded terms in the New Testament's eschatological vocabulary. It can refer to the general pressure and distress that the world exerts on those who do not conform to its values, to the specific persecution that the community of faith experiences at the hands of hostile powers, and to the great tribulation that characterizes the most intense manifestation of anti-kingdom pressure in the inter-advent age. In John 16:33, the reference is to the first of these: the general, ongoing, constitutive pressure that the world exerts on those who are in Christ. The disciples who hear this promise are not being told that something unusual is about to happen to them; they are being told the basic truth about what it means to belong to Christ in a world that does not want Him.

The structure of the verse is designed to hold the already and the not-yet in exactly the tension the inter-advent age requires: "In Me you may have peace." The peace is present, real, and available, it is the shalom of those who belong to the One who has already overcome the world. "In the world you have tribulation." The tribulation is equally present, real, and unavoidable, it is the pressure that the world exerts on the community of the kingdom that the world refuses to acknowledge. "I have overcome the world." The victory is accomplished, past tense, definitive, irreversible. The same One who promises the tribulation declares the victory that makes it endurable. The church does not suffer because the kingdom has failed to arrive; it suffers because the kingdom has arrived in a world that is still under the dominion of the one who has been defeated but not yet abolished. The tribulation is the sign of the conflict, not of the defeat.

B. Tribulation as the Shape of Kingdom Advance

The New Testament consistently presents tribulation not merely as the inevitable byproduct of kingdom presence in a hostile world, but as the specific shape of the kingdom's advance in the inter-advent age. Acts 14:22 captures the apostolic theology of suffering with characteristic economy: "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." The entrance into the kingdom's fullness, its consummation at the return of Christ, comes through suffering, not around it. This is not a counsel of masochism or a romanticization of pain; it is the recognition that the path through which the King Himself advanced to His throne, the cross, is the path that the community of His disciples must also walk, in their measure and in their way.

Paul's theology of suffering and glory is built on precisely this logic. In Romans 8:17, participation in Christ's inheritance is inseparable from participation in His suffering: "and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him." The "if" is not a conditional of doubt but a conditional of expected and genuine co-participation: the community that shares the King's glory shares His suffering because the path to the glory passes through the suffering. Philippians 3:10–11 makes the same point from the perspective of Paul's own eschatological ambition: "that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead." The resurrection is the eschatological goal; the fellowship of His sufferings is the path.

The pastoral implication of this theology is direct and demanding. The church that expects a tribulation-free existence in the inter-advent age has misread the New Testament's eschatological witness. The promises of the kingdom are not promises of comfort, security, and cultural acceptance in the present age; they are promises of the peace that surpasses understanding in the midst of tribulation (Philippians 4:7), of the strength to endure through the Spirit who indwells the community of the King (Ephesians 3:16), of the ultimate vindication that the returning King will accomplish. The church that knows this is able to face suffering without being destroyed by it, to endure persecution without interpreting it as evidence of the kingdom's absence, and to maintain its witness in the very conditions that the world intends to silence it. Tribulation is not the church's shame; it is, in the economy of the kingdom, its calling.

II. THE GROANING OF CREATION, ROMANS 8:18–25

The Not-Yet of the Kingdom Written into the Fabric of Creation

A. Creation Subjected to Futility

The most comprehensive and the most theologically deep account of the not-yet dimensions of the kingdom in the Pauline letters is Romans 8:18–25. Paul's argument here operates at the cosmic level, not merely the personal: it is not only individual believers who are in a condition of eschatological incompleteness but the entire created order. "For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (vv. 20–21). Creation itself, the entire physical, material, non-human world, is in a condition of futility (mataiotetī) and slavery to corruption, subjected to this condition by God's judicial decree in consequence of the fall, and held in this condition with hope, the hope of liberation that will come through the revelation of the glory of the children of God at the resurrection.

The groaning Paul describes is three-dimensional. Creation groans (v. 22): the entire non-human created order, subjected to futility at the fall, is in a condition of labor pains, the pain that is not random suffering but the suffering of a travail that is oriented toward a birth, a new creation, a delivery that is coming. The word "together" (systenazei) suggests a symphonic groaning, not a cacophony of isolated individual suffering: the whole creation participates in a single, unified, purposeful cry for liberation. The believer groans (v. 23): those who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, the down-payment and foretaste of the age to come, groan inwardly as they wait for the adoption, the redemption of their body. The presence of the firstfruits makes the absence of the full harvest more

acutely felt, not less. The Spirit groans (v. 26): even the Spirit Himself intercedes for the saints "with groanings too deep for words," articulating the deepest longings of the new creation community in a language beyond the capacity of human speech.

The creation's groaning is Paul's most explicit and most comprehensive statement of the not-yet dimensions of the inter-advent age at the cosmic level. The kingdom has arrived in the person of Christ; the Spirit has been poured out; the firstfruits of the resurrection age are genuinely present in the community of faith. But the creation has not yet been delivered. Disease, death, natural disaster, the decay of the physical world, all of these are symptoms of the futility and corruption to which creation was subjected at the fall, and they continue throughout the inter-advent period. The kingdom's arrival does not immediately reverse the creation's groaning; it sets the groaning within an eschatological horizon of hope, because the same God who subjected creation to futility subjected it "in hope", with the certain intention of liberating it through the redemption of those who are in Christ.

B. *Waiting Eagerly in Hope*

The eschatological posture Paul commends in Romans 8:18–25 is patient, eager, hope-filled waiting. "For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it" (vv. 24–25). The waiting is not passive resignation; it is the active, alert, expectant posture of those who know exactly what they are waiting for and who are confident it is coming. The Greek verb translated "wait eagerly" (apekdechomai) conveys a neck-craning, forward-leaning anticipation, the posture of those who have spotted the arrival of a long-expected guest and are leaning forward to receive them.

The hope Paul describes is grounded not in human optimism or in extrapolation from present trends but in the character and commitment of the God who subjected creation to futility in hope. The hope is as certain as the God who promised it, and the God who subjected creation to futility is the same God who raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 8:11), and if He raised Jesus from the dead, the liberation of creation from its futility and corruption is as certain as the resurrection morning. The groaning of creation is not evidence of the kingdom's absence; it is the birth pang of the new creation that the kingdom's arrival has set in motion. Labor pains do not indicate that the birth will not happen; they indicate that it is happening, that the delivery is approaching, that the travail is oriented toward a liberation that will make the suffering intelligible in retrospect.

The practical implications of Romans 8:18–25 for the congregation's engagement with suffering are several and profound. The believer who suffers is not suffering outside the scope of God's redemptive purposes; their suffering is part of the creation's groaning, which is itself held within the "in hope" of God's subjecting of creation. The believer who experiences the aching incompleteness of the inter-advent age, who feels the distance between the Spirit's firstfruits and the full harvest they desire, between the present imperfection of sanctification and the glorification that awaits, is not experiencing a malfunction of the Christian life but one of its most authentic features. And the believer who clings to the hope of Romans 8 in the midst of suffering is the believer whose eschatological conviction has become the most practically formative force in their life: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (v. 18). The glory is coming. The groaning is real but temporary. The hope is certain and eternal.

III. THE LATTER DAYS AND THEIR MORAL CHARACTER

What the New Testament Expects as the Inter-Advent Age Progresses

A. 2 Timothy 3:1–5, Difficult Times in the Last Days

One of the most sobering passages in the entire New Testament for the church's eschatological self-understanding is 2 Timothy 3:1–5: "But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; avoid such men as these." The catalogue is remarkable both for its specificity and for its scope: these are not the behaviors of occasional bad actors but the pattern of a world that has turned in on itself, worshipping the creature rather than the Creator, and producing the full range of moral and relational devastation that such worship always generates.

The phrase "in the last days" is crucial for the eschatological interpretation of this passage. As we established in Lesson 2, the New Testament consistently uses "last days" language to describe the entire inter-advent period, the age inaugurated by the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost and extending to the return of Christ. This is not a description of conditions that will exist only in the final years before the parousia; it is a description of the moral character of the entire inter-advent age, which includes the moral and spiritual declension that Paul catalogues. The difficult times are not a future phenomenon that the present church can safely ignore; they are the characteristic moral climate of the age in which the church already lives and always has lived since Pentecost, an age that, if anything, intensifies in its moral declension as it approaches the consummation.

The concluding phrase of Paul's catalogue deserves particular attention: these are men "holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power." The most dangerous manifestation of the moral declension Paul describes is not the overt paganism of those who have never professed Christ; it is the religious formalism of those who maintain the external appearance of Christianity while their lives are shaped by the values of the domain of darkness rather than the kingdom of Christ. This is the "fine print" of the last days' moral challenge for the church: not primarily the hostility of the world outside but the compromise of those inside who hold the form of godliness while denying its transforming power. The church that maintains its integrity in the inter-advent age is the church that refuses to settle for the form and insists on the power, the genuine, transforming, self-crucifying, Spirit-wrought power of the gospel at work in human lives.

B. Matthew 24:9–14, Tribulation, Apostasy, and the Gospel's Advance

Jesus' Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24 is one of the most debated passages in all of eschatology, and we will return to it in fuller detail in Unit 5 (Lessons 18–19). For the purposes of this lesson, however, the specific content of Matthew 24:9–14 is directly relevant to the characterization of the inter-advent age's not-yet dimensions: "Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name. At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another. Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many. Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved. This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come."

The passage describes several interlocking features of the inter-advent age that stand in apparent tension with the "already" of Lesson 7. The kingdom has arrived, but the tribulation it generates in a hostile world is real and deadly: persecution, betrayal, hatred, apostasy, false prophecy, moral declension, the cooling of love. These are not exceptional circumstances that afflict the church only under extreme historical conditions; Jesus promises them as the normal texture of the age between His first and second comings. The church that knows these things in advance is the church that is equipped to endure them without being surprised, disillusioned, or spiritually destroyed by them. The one who endures to the end will be saved, not the one who avoids the tribulation, not the one who is extracted from it before it intensifies, but the one who endures through it to the end.

And yet the passage closes with one of the most missionally generative promises in the entire Gospels: "This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come." The inter-advent age is, simultaneously, the age of the church's tribulation and the age of the gospel's worldwide advance. These two realities are not in contradiction; they are the two faces of the same inter-advent reality. The gospel advances through the suffering community, not despite it. The testimony to all nations is given precisely by the community that endures the tribulation, maintains its witness, and refuses to fall away under pressure. The mission of the church in the inter-advent age is not the elimination of suffering but the proclamation of the gospel through suffering, until the end comes and the One who promised to return keeps His word.

IV. THE MYSTERY OF LAWLESSNESS, 2 THESSALONIANS 2:1–12

The Man of Lawlessness and the Restrainer in the Inter-Advent Age

A. The Eschatological Context of Paul's Teaching

One of the most exegetically challenging and theologically significant passages for the doctrine of the inter-advent age is 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12. The Thessalonian congregation has been alarmed by a report that "the day of the Lord has come" (v. 2), a report that has produced eschatological anxiety and practical disruption. Paul's response is to insist that the day of the Lord has not yet come, because certain events must precede it: the apostasia (the falling away or apostasy) and the revelation of the man of lawlessness, the son of destruction, who exalts himself above every so-called god, takes his seat in the temple of God, and proclaims himself to be God (vv. 3–4). As long as the restrainer ("he who now restrains") is in place, the man of lawlessness cannot be revealed; but when the restrainer is removed, he will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of His mouth and bring him to nothing by the appearance of His coming (vv. 6–8).

The identities of the man of lawlessness and the restrainer have been debated throughout the history of the church, and a definitive resolution is beyond what the text itself provides. The man of lawlessness has been identified with the Roman Emperor Nero (by those who read the passage as primarily addressing first-century conditions), with the papacy (by the Reformers, including the confession tradition that Crosspoint has adopted), with a specific future individual who will appear before the parousia (by dispensationalists and some historic premillennialists), and with the principle of anti-Christian power that recurs throughout history in various institutional forms (by many amillennialists). The restrainer has been identified with the Roman Empire, with the rule of law in human government, with the proclamation of the gospel, with the archangel Michael, and most

commonly in the Reformed tradition, with the Holy Spirit. Each of these identifications has exegetical warrant and historical precedent, and this lesson does not claim to resolve what the text itself leaves open.

What the passage does establish with clarity, regardless of how the specific identifications are resolved, are several important truths about the inter-advent age. First, the inter-advent age is characterized by a "mystery of lawlessness" that is already at work (v. 7): the anti-kingdom forces that will reach their fullest expression in the man of lawlessness are already operative in the present age, in the form of the apostasia that Paul describes in 2 Timothy 3 and the various manifestations of anti-Christian power that the church has faced in every generation. Second, these anti-kingdom forces are currently being restrained by a power or person that prevents them from reaching their ultimate intensity. Third, the removal of the restrainer will allow the full revelation of the lawless one, whose destruction is then accomplished by the returning Lord Himself. The inter-advent age is the age of the mystery's operation under restraint, an age in which evil is real, active, and escalating, but is not yet at the full intensity that the end of the age will bring.

B. *The Apostasy and Its Pastoral Significance*

The term apostasia in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, translated "the apostasy" or "the falling away", is one of the most significant eschatological terms in the Pauline corpus. In its classical Greek usage, apostasia referred to a political revolt or defection. In the New Testament and in Hellenistic Jewish literature, it consistently refers to religious defection, the falling away from the faith, the abandonment of allegiance to God or to the covenant. Paul here describes a great apostasia that must precede the revelation of the man of lawlessness. Whether this is a single, climactic event of mass defection at the end of the age or the cumulative apostasy of the inter-advent period that has been building throughout church history, or both, is a matter of legitimate exegetical debate. What is not debatable is that the inter-advent age is characterized, from first to last, by apostasy: by people who have professed faith abandoning it, by communities that once bore the name of Christ drifting from His gospel, by the cooling of love that Jesus described in Matthew 24:12.

The pastoral significance of this apostasy expectation cannot be overstated. The church that is surprised by apostasy, that did not expect its members to fall away, its neighbors to abandon professed faith, its cultural environment to drift from Christian values, is the church that has failed to read the New Testament's eschatological witness carefully. Apostasy is not a sign that the kingdom has failed or that something has gone wrong with God's plan; it is the expected feature of the inter-advent age that the New Testament prepares the church to endure without being destabilized by it. The church that knows apostasy is coming is the church that takes seriously the ministry of genuine discipleship, that does not settle for the form of godliness without the power, that grounds its members in the Word of God and the community of faith deeply enough to produce the endurance that Jesus promises to the one who perseveres to the end.

There is also a missiological dimension to the apostasy expectation. The falling away of those who once professed faith is one of the most acute pastoral challenges the present-day church faces, the loss of young people who grew up in the church and have left it, the departure of long-term members who have been captured by the values of the domain of darkness, the gradual de-Christianization of once-churched communities and cultures. These losses are real and they are painful. But they are not eschatological surprises; they are features of the inter-advent landscape that the New Testament maps with precision. The response they call for is not despair but renewed commitment to the depth of discipleship that produces endurance, renewed fidelity to the gospel that alone has the power to hold the soul through the pressures of the last days, and renewed prayer for those who have fallen

away, because the God who rescues from the domain of darkness is able to rescue even those who have returned to it.

V. SUFFERING AS VOCATION, 1 PETER 4:12–17

The Church's Calling to Participate in Christ's Sufferings

A. Do Not Be Surprised at the Fiery Ordeal

The most pastorally direct treatment of the church's suffering in the inter-advent age is 1 Peter 4:12–17: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name."

The opening prohibition is the most important pastoral word in the passage: "do not be surprised." The Greek verb (xenizesthe) means to be struck with astonishment as by something foreign or alien. The fiery ordeal, the persecution and suffering that comes upon the community of faith, is not to be treated as something foreign or alien, because it is not. It is the expected, normal, constitutive experience of the community that bears the name of Christ in a world that rejected Him. Surprise at suffering, in the New Testament's eschatological framework, is a symptom of a deficient eschatology, of the failure to receive the teaching that Jesus gave His disciples in John 16:33 and that the apostolic tradition elaborated in every subsequent letter. The church that is not surprised by suffering is the church that has read the New Testament's eschatological witness with sufficient care to know what the inter-advent age is like.

Peter's positive exhortation is equally striking: "to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing." The basis for rejoicing in the midst of suffering is not Stoic detachment from pain, not therapeutic reframing of the situation as secretly a blessing, and not the expectation that the suffering will end soon. The basis is participation: the suffering community shares the sufferings of the One who suffered before them and on their behalf, and this participation is a form of communion with Christ that produces its own specific joy. The joy is forward-looking: "so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation." The present sharing of Christ's sufferings is the pledge of future sharing in His glory, the same logic Paul employs in Romans 8:17 ("if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him"). The joy of the suffering community is the eschatological joy of those who know the end of the story and who therefore receive even the most painful present chapter as a chapter in the narrative that is moving toward that end.

B. The Judgment That Begins with the Household of God

Verse 17 of the passage introduces one of the most sobering eschatological statements in the Petrine letters: "For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?" The "judgment" that Peter has in mind is not the final eschatological judgment but the purifying, disciplinary suffering that the community of faith experiences in the

present age, the "fiery ordeal" of the preceding verse. This suffering is not punitive in the sense of bearing God's condemnatory judgment; it is purgative in the sense of the refiner's fire that removes impurities and produces the purity of gold (cf. 1 Peter 1:6–7). The church's suffering in the inter-advent age is a form of divine discipline, carried out in love, designed to produce the holiness and perseverance that the final day will require.

The logic of verse 17's rhetorical question is also significant for the church's pastoral self-understanding. If the household of God, the community that belongs to the Father, bears the name of Christ, and has received the Spirit, undergoes the purifying judgment of present suffering, how much more severe will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel? The suffering of the church in the inter-advent age is not evidence that God has abandoned His people; it is evidence that He has not, that He is at work in their suffering to produce the holiness that the final day demands. And it is, simultaneously, a warning to those outside the household: if this is what God does with those He loves in the present age, what awaits those who have refused His love at the final judgment? The suffering church is not simply the victim of historical circumstances; it is the community whose suffering carries a testimony, to the world about the reality of the kingdom it inhabits, and to the church itself about the seriousness of the holiness that kingdom demands.

The specific distinction Peter draws in verses 15–16, between suffering as a criminal (murderer, thief, evildoer, meddler) and suffering as a Christian, is a pastoral clarification that protects the theology of kingdom suffering from misapplication. Not all suffering in the life of the church is kingdom suffering. The suffering that comes from one's own moral failures, from the consequences of sin, from the legitimate grievances of those one has wronged, this is not the participation in Christ's sufferings that Peter is celebrating. The suffering that carries the name "Christian" as its only cause, the suffering that comes specifically because one belongs to Christ in a world that does not want Him, is the suffering in which Peter calls the church to rejoice and to glorify God. The distinction is practically important because it prevents the theological romanticization of all suffering and because it calls the church to a rigorous self-examination: is this suffering that I am enduring the result of kingdom faithfulness, or is it the consequence of my own moral failure? The answer shapes the appropriate response.

VI. THE COSMIC CONFLICT, REVELATION 12:10–12

The Dragon's Rage and the Church's Victory

A. The Heavenly Perspective on the Inter-Advent Conflict

Revelation 12 provides the most comprehensive and the most cosmically framed account of the inter-advent conflict in the entire New Testament. The chapter presents, in apocalyptic imagery, the war in heaven that accompanied the exaltation of Christ and the subsequent rage of the dragon, Satan, against the woman and her offspring, the community of faith. The heavenly proclamation of Revelation 12:10–12 is the interpretive key to the entire chapter and to the broader inter-advent conflict it depicts: "Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, he who accuses them before our God day and night. And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death. For this reason, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them. Woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, knowing that he has only a short time."

The structure of this proclamation is the structure of the entire inter-advent age from the heavenly perspective. The salvation, power, and kingdom of God have come, this is the "already" of Lesson 7, the inauguration of the kingdom in Christ's exaltation. The accuser of the brethren has been thrown down, the decisive defeat of Satan accomplished in the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. The saints have overcome him by the blood of the Lamb, the word of their testimony, and their willingness to die, the threefold description of how kingdom victory is achieved in the inter-advent age: not by military force, not by political power, but by the atoning blood of the Lamb received in faith, the gospel declared in testimony, and the readiness to suffer and die for the name of Christ. And the dragon has come down in great wrath, knowing his time is short, the "not yet" of Lesson 8, the ongoing ferocity of the defeated enemy who knows his end is certain.

The three instruments of the saints' victory deserve careful attention because they define the specific shape of kingdom faithfulness in the inter-advent age. The blood of the Lamb: the saints' victory is grounded not in their own moral achievement or spiritual heroism but in the substitutionary atonement of Christ, whose death has removed the accuser's ground for accusation and placed the saints in a position of permanent judicial vindication before the throne. The word of their testimony: the saints' victory advances through the proclamation of the gospel, the bearing of witness to what the Lamb has accomplished, the declaration of His name in the face of every power that would silence it. They did not love their life even when faced with death: the saints' victory is sealed by the willingness to lose the present life rather than abandon the testimony that alone sustains it. The martyrdom that the world intends as the silencing of the church becomes, in the economy of the kingdom, its most powerful proclamation.

B. *The Dragon's Short Time and the Church's Assured Victory*

The phrase "knowing that he has only a short time" (v. 12) is one of the most pastorally significant statements in the entire book of Revelation. The dragon's rage is intense, the inter-advent age is characterized by genuine, ferocious, and sometimes lethal spiritual opposition to the community of faith. But the dragon's rage is bounded: he has only a short time. The "short time" is not a chronological statement about the brevity of the inter-advent period, it has already extended for two millennia, but an eschatological statement about the certainty and completeness of the dragon's impending defeat. From the heavenly perspective that Revelation inhabits, the end is so certain and so near that every remaining moment of the dragon's activity is a "short time" compared to the eternal reign of the Lamb that follows his final defeat.

The heavenly declaration of verse 12 is also a crucial corrective to any eschatological reading of the inter-advent age that interprets the church's suffering as evidence of the kingdom's weakness or absence. The suffering of the saints in Revelation, the martyred souls under the altar, the witnesses killed in the streets, the woman fleeing into the wilderness, is not interpreted from the heavenly perspective as the defeat of the kingdom. It is interpreted as the kingdom's advance through the means the Lamb Himself established: suffering, testimony, and the willingness to die. The dragon's rage against the church is the rage of the defeated, the fury of the one who knows his end is near and who seeks to inflict as much damage as possible before the final blow falls. The church that understands this is the church that can endure the dragon's rage without being terrorized by it, because it reads the rage not as evidence of ultimate threat but as evidence of ultimate desperation.

The Revelation 12 vision also provides the framework for understanding the escalating character of the not-yet's intensity as the inter-advent age approaches its conclusion. The dragon's wrath increases as his time diminishes: the closer the parousia approaches, the more ferocious the opposition to the church's witness becomes. This is

consistent with the expectation of 2 Thessalonians 2, the mystery of lawlessness building toward the man of lawlessness's full revelation, and with Jesus' warning in Matthew 24 that tribulation and apostasy will characterize the period leading to the end. The not-yet of the kingdom is not a static condition; it is an escalating tension that will reach its crisis point at the final confrontation between the Lamb and the dragon, from which the Lamb emerges as absolute and undisputed conqueror. The church that inhabits the inter-advent age inhabits a narrative that is building toward a climax, and the increasing intensity of the conflict is the sign that the climax is approaching.

VII. THE POSTURE OF PATIENT ENDURANCE

Living Well in the Tension Between the Already and the Not Yet

A. The Theological Virtues of the Inter-Advent Age

The tension between the already of the kingdom's inauguration and the not-yet of its consummation does not leave the church in a neutral holding pattern; it calls for a specific set of theological virtues that are cultivated precisely by inhabiting that tension with faithfulness. The first and most fundamental of these virtues is patient endurance (hypomone), the capacity to remain under the weight of the not-yet without being crushed by it, to continue in faithful obedience and witness even when the visible evidence of the kingdom's presence is difficult to discern, and to maintain hope in the promise of the consummation when the groaning of the present seems to drown it out. Hypomone is not passive resignation; it is active, alert, and purposeful steadfastness, the endurance of the long-distance runner who does not sprint at the start and collapse before the finish but paces themselves for the full course.

Hebrews 12:1–2 presents patient endurance as the fundamental eschatological virtue of the inter-advent age: "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." The race is long. The course is not always pleasant. The encumbrances are real and the entangling sin is constant. But the cloud of witnesses surrounds the runner, the eschatological joy at the finish line sustains the effort, and the One who ran the course before them and is seated at the right hand of the throne is both the model and the motivation for the endurance the race requires.

Alongside patient endurance, the inter-advent age calls for the virtue of eschatological sobriety, the clear-eyed, theologically grounded assessment of the present age that refuses both the triumphalism of over-realized eschatology and the despair of under-realized eschatology. The sober believer knows that the kingdom has arrived and that its advance is real and certain, but they also know that the not-yet is equally real, that suffering is the expected shape of kingdom life in this age, and that the fullness of what they have been promised will not be available until the King returns. This sobriety is not pessimism; it is realism, the realism of those who have read the New Testament's eschatological witness carefully enough to know what to expect from the inter-advent age and what to leave for the consummation.

B. *The Not-Yet as the Space of Mission and Witness*

The not-yet of the kingdom's consummation is not merely the context of the church's suffering; it is the context of the church's mission. The mission mandate of Matthew 28:18–20 is given to a community that lives in the tension of the already and the not-yet, and it is given specifically in that tension: go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them, until the end of the age ("I am with you always, even to the end of the age"). The mission is the church's vocation for the entire inter-advent period, not only when conditions are favorable, not only when the world is receptive, not only when the community of faith has sufficient cultural influence to make the mission efficient. The mission continues through the tribulation, through the apostasy, through the cooling of love, through the rage of the dragon, through the suffering that the blood of the Lamb and the word of testimony cost. The mission does not pause for the not-yet; it advances through it.

Paul's description of the missionary vocation in 2 Corinthians 4:7–11 captures the texture of mission in the not-yet with extraordinary precision: "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body." The treasure, the gospel, the glory of God in the face of Christ, is entrusted to fragile, mortal, vulnerable, afflicted earthen vessels precisely so that the power of its advance is unmistakably God's and not human. The affliction is real. The perplexity is real. The persecution is real. The being struck down is real. But none of it is crushing, despairing, forsaking, or destroying, because the power that advances the gospel through these broken vessels is the power of the God who raised Christ from the dead and who is doing the same in and through those who carry His name.

We close this lesson where it belongs: in the specific, pastoral, eschatologically grounded assurance that the God who has promised to consummate the kingdom is the God who is present in the not-yet dimensions of the inter-advent age with His sustaining, empowering, mission-advancing grace. The church that has received the already of Lesson 7 and the not-yet of Lesson 8 together is the church that is equipped to live in the tension between them with faithfulness, courage, and hope. Not triumphalism, not despair, not withdrawal, not accommodation, but the patient endurance of those who know the Lamb has already won, who carry His testimony in earthen vessels, and who wait with eager longing for the day when the not-yet becomes the forever-and-always of the new creation's unending joy. Come, Lord Jesus. Come quickly.

> *"In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world."*
> **John 16:33, NASB 1995**

Theological Terms and Definitions

Thlipsis	Greek for "tribulation," "pressure," or "distress." Used throughout the New Testament to describe the suffering the community of faith experiences in the world (John 16:33), the persecution that accompanies kingdom faithfulness (Matthew 24:9), and the great tribulation that characterizes the most intense manifestation of anti-kingdom pressure (Matthew 24:21; Revelation 7:14). On the amillennial reading, the great tribulation is the entire inter-advent period of persecution, not a specific future seven-year period.
Mataiotetī	Greek for "futility" or "vanity," used in Romans 8:20 to describe the condition to which the creation was subjected at the fall: "the creation was subjected to futility (mataiotetī), not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope." The subjection of creation to futility is the cosmic consequence of the fall, encompassing the disorder, decay, and death that characterize the non-human created order throughout the inter-advent age, and awaiting liberation through the resurrection of the children of God.
Systenazei	Greek compound verb ("groans together"), used in Romans 8:22: "the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now." The "together" dimension implies the symphonic, unified character of creation's groaning, the entire non-human created order participating in a single, purposeful, birth-pain-structured cry for the liberation that the resurrection of the children of God will bring.
Apekdechomai	Greek for "wait eagerly," "eagerly anticipate," used in Romans 8:19, 23, 25 and Philippians 3:20 for the forward-leaning, neck-craning eschatological expectation of the believer. The word conveys active, alert, expectant waiting, not passive resignation but the posture of those who know exactly what they are waiting for and are leaning forward to receive it. The characteristic posture of the church in the not-yet of the inter-advent age.
Apostasia	Greek for "falling away" or "apostasy" (from apo, away from, and histemi, to stand). Used in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 for the great falling away that must precede the revelation of the man of lawlessness. In classical Greek, apostasia referred to a political revolt or defection; in the New Testament, it refers to religious defection, the abandonment of allegiance to God and to the faith. Whether the apostasia of 2 Thessalonians 2:3 is a climactic end-times event or the cumulative apostasy of the entire inter-advent period is debated; the expectation of ongoing apostasy as a feature of the inter-advent age is not.
Man of Lawlessness	The figure described in 2 Thessalonians 2:3–4 who will be revealed before the day of the Lord: "the man of lawlessness, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God." Identified variously in the history of interpretation with Nero, the papacy, the principle of anti-Christian power, or a specific future individual. On the amillennial reading, he represents the culminating manifestation of the mystery of lawlessness that has been at work throughout the inter-advent age.
The Restrainer (Katechon)	The figure or force described in 2 Thessalonians 2:6–7 that currently restrains the full revelation of the man of lawlessness: "for the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way." The identity of the restrainer is one of the most debated questions in NT eschatology, with major proposals including the Roman Empire and its emperor, the rule of law, the archangel Michael, the proclamation of the gospel, and the Holy Spirit. The restrainer's function is to prevent the full escalation of lawlessness until the appointed time.
Hypomone	Greek for "patient endurance," "steadfastness," or "perseverance", the characteristic virtue of the church in the not-yet of the inter-advent age. Not passive resignation but active,

	purposeful steadfastness under the weight of suffering and the tension of the already/not yet. Central to the eschatological paraenesis of Hebrews 12:1–2 (run with endurance), Revelation 3:10 (kept the word of My perseverance), and 14:12 (the perseverance of the saints).
Mystery of Lawlessness	Paul's description in 2 Thessalonians 2:7 of the anti-kingdom force already at work in the inter-advent age: "the mystery of lawlessness is already at work." "Mystery" (mystērion) in the New Testament refers not to something unknowable but to something previously hidden that has now been partially disclosed. The mystery of lawlessness is the anti-kingdom principle that operates under restraint throughout the inter-advent age and will reach its full revelation in the man of lawlessness at the end of the age.
Earthen Vessels	Paul's metaphor in 2 Corinthians 4:7 for the weak, mortal, fragile human agents through whom the treasure of the gospel is carried in the inter-advent age: "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves." The earthen vessel metaphor captures the paradox of the inter-advent mission: the most powerful message in the universe is entrusted to the most fragile of vessels precisely so that the power of its advance is unmistakably divine.

Practical Application

A. *For the Mind: What Must We Believe?*

We must believe that tribulation is the normal, expected, constitutive experience of the community of faith in the inter-advent age, not an aberration to be puzzled over, not a sign of the kingdom's failure, and not a condition to be escaped by relocating the church to a more comfortable cultural position. Jesus promised tribulation in John 16:33. The apostles confirmed it in Acts 14:22, Romans 8:17–18, 1 Peter 4:12–17, and 2 Timothy 3:12. The entire New Testament's eschatological witness is consistent on this point. The church that has genuinely received this teaching is the church that will not be destabilized by suffering, because it knew it was coming, it knows what it means, and it knows where it is going.

We must believe that the creation's groaning is held within the eschatological hope of Romans 8:18–25 and that the present suffering is "not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us." This is not a minimization of suffering; it is the eschatological calibration of suffering against the coming glory that alone gives the present pain its proper proportion. The believer who holds this conviction is not the believer who denies the reality of their suffering; it is the believer whose suffering is contextualized by a hope so large and so certain that even the most acute present pain cannot fill the entire frame.

We must believe that the not-yet of the kingdom is not an embarrassment to be explained away or a problem to be solved by a better eschatological system. It is the honest, biblically faithful description of the age in which the church lives, an age of genuine kingdom presence and genuine ongoing conflict, of firstfruits and full harvest, of the already-accomplished victory and the not-yet-consummated vindication. The church that receives this teaching with honest faith is the church that is equipped to endure what the inter-advent age demands of it: not comfort, not triumph, not cultural acceptance, but patient endurance in the confidence that the Lamb who was slain is coming again to make all things new.

B. *For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?*

We should feel the appropriate, honest weight of the not-yet, the groaning, the longing, the sense of incompleteness that the inter-advent age is designed to produce. Paul does not tell the church to suppress or spiritually bypass the groaning of Romans 8; he names it, validates it, and places it within an eschatological framework of hope. The believer who honestly feels the weight of the not-yet, who groans with creation, who longs for the redemption of the body, who aches for the consummation of what the firstfruits have only partially realized, is the believer whose eschatological instincts are most deeply biblical.

We should also feel the specific joy that participation in Christ's sufferings produces. This is not the joy of masochism, not the performance of cheerfulness in the face of genuine pain, and not the suppression of grief and lament. It is the specific, forward-looking, eschatologically grounded joy of those who know that sharing the suffering of the Lamb is the path to sharing His glory, that the cross precedes the crown, that the not-yet of the inter-advent age is the doorway through which the church is walking toward the eternal glory that the returning King will bring.

We should desire the virtue of hypomone, not as a spiritual achievement to be grasped but as a gift to be received from the God who subjects creation to futility "in hope." The patient endurance the inter-advent age demands is not a product of human willpower or stoic self-discipline; it is the fruit of an eschatological conviction so deeply

received that it shapes the believer's posture toward suffering from the inside out. Ask God to give this endurance. Ask Him to root the hope of Romans 8:18 so deeply in the soul that no present suffering can displace it. That is the prayer the not-yet demands, and it is the prayer the God who gave the not-yet is pleased to answer.

C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

- Read Romans 8:18–25 slowly this week, pausing at each element of the groaning: creation's groaning (v. 22), the believer's groaning (v. 23), and the Spirit's groaning (v. 26). Identify the one area of your own life where the groaning is most acute right now, the specific dimension of the not-yet that you feel most keenly. Write it down. Then read verses 18 and 28 alongside it: the present suffering is not worthy to be compared with the coming glory, and all things are working together for good for those who love God. Let the text do its pastoral work in your specific situation.
- Read 1 Peter 4:12–17 and apply the distinction Peter draws in verses 15–16 to your own current experience of suffering. Is the suffering you are carrying the result of kingdom faithfulness, suffering as a Christian, or is it suffering as the consequence of your own sin and failure? The two require very different pastoral responses. If it is kingdom suffering, receive Peter's exhortation to rejoice and to glorify God in this name. If it is the consequence of sin, receive the call to repentance, reconciliation, and the change of behavior that the situation demands.
- Identify one person in your congregation or community who is currently experiencing the fiery ordeal of the inter-advent age, persecution, suffering, spiritual attack, the experience of apostasy in those they love, or the grinding sense that the kingdom's arrival has not changed the basic conditions of their daily lives. Bring them the specific pastoral resources this lesson provides: the promise of John 16:33, the groaning-held-in-hope of Romans 8, the participation language of 1 Peter 4, the "short time" assurance of Revelation 12:12. Be specific and be personal. Let the doctrine serve the person.
- Reflect on the 2 Timothy 3:5 description of those who hold "a form of godliness" while denying its power. In what specific ways might this description apply to patterns in your own congregation's life or your own personal practice of faith? Where has form been maintained while power has been allowed to diminish? Name it honestly before God this week and ask Him for the renewal that only the Spirit's transforming work can produce.
- Memorize Revelation 12:11 this week: "And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death." Carry this verse as the three-part definition of kingdom faithfulness in the inter-advent age: the blood, the testimony, and the willingness to lose the present life for the sake of the One who lost His life for us. Let it shape the specific choices you make this week about where you invest your energy, your voice, and your sense of security.

Key Texts: *John 16:33; Romans 8:18–25; 2 Timothy 3:1–5, 12; Matthew 24:9–14; 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12; 1 Peter 4:12–17; Revelation 12:10–12*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- On a scale from one to ten, how surprised are you when the community of faith experiences suffering, persecution, or apostasy? What does your level of surprise reveal about the depth to which you have received the New Testament's eschatological teaching about the inter-advent age? After this lesson, what specifically would you want to change about your default expectation of what the Christian life in this age looks like?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read John 16:33. What three claims does Jesus make in this single verse? What is the relationship between the peace He promises, the tribulation He predicts, and the victory He declares? How does the grammatical structure of the verse, the present indicative tenses of "have peace" and "have tribulation," alongside the perfect indicative of "I have overcome", illuminate the eschatological framework within which the church's suffering is to be understood?
- Read Romans 8:18–25. Identify the three categories of groaning (creation, believer, Spirit) and describe what Paul says about each. What is the relationship between the creation's subjection to futility (v. 20) and the hope in which it was subjected (v. 20b)? What does Paul mean by "the firstfruits of the Spirit" (v. 23), and how does the firstfruits metaphor illuminate the relationship between the already (what the Spirit has given) and the not-yet (what the believer still awaits)?
- Read 2 Timothy 3:1–5 and 12. What specific behaviors does Paul catalogue in verses 1–5? Why does the concluding description, "holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power", represent a particularly dangerous manifestation of the inter-advent age's moral challenge? What does verse 12 say about all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus, and how does this compare with the "tribulation" promise of John 16:33?
- Read 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12. What is the pastoral problem Paul is addressing (vv. 1–2)? What two events must precede the day of the Lord (v. 3)? What does Paul say about the restrainer (vv. 6–7), and what happens when the restrainer is removed? What does verse 7's description of "the mystery of lawlessness" already at work tell us about the character of the inter-advent age in which the church already lives?
- Read Revelation 12:10–12. What three things does the heavenly voice declare have "come" in verse 10? What are the three instruments by which the saints overcame the accuser (v. 11), and what does each instrument tell us about the shape of kingdom faithfulness in the inter-advent age? What does "knowing that he has only a short time" (v. 12) communicate about the character of the dragon's rage and the certainty of his defeat?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that tribulation is the "normal, expected, constitutive experience" of the community of faith in the inter-advent age, not an aberration. Does your reading of the New Testament support this claim? Can you identify specific passages, beyond those examined in this lesson, that reinforce or complicate it? How does this claim sit alongside the genuine experiences of revival, cultural influence, and gospel success that the church has also experienced in various periods of history?

- The lesson describes three groaning entities in Romans 8:18–25 (creation, believer, Spirit) and argues that the groaning is held within the eschatological framework of hope. How does the metaphor of birth pains (v. 22) shape the meaning of the groaning? What is the difference between a groan of despair and a groan of labor, and how does that distinction apply to the church's experience of the not-yet?
- The identification of the man of lawlessness in 2 Thessalonians 2 has been deeply contested throughout church history. The lesson acknowledges this without claiming to resolve it definitively. What does the passage establish with clarity regardless of how the specific identifications are resolved? How do those clear teachings shape the church's self-understanding in the present inter-advent age?
- Revelation 12:11 identifies the three instruments of the saints' victory as the blood of the Lamb, the word of their testimony, and willingness to die. What is the logic connecting these three? Why is each one necessary, and how do they work together as a description of kingdom faithfulness in the inter-advent age? What would it look like, concretely, to apply all three instruments in your own current context?
- The lesson describes the not-yet as both the context of the church's suffering and the context of its mission, arguing that the two are inseparable in the New Testament's eschatological framework. Do you find this connection convincing? Can you think of historical examples where the church's suffering became the context of its most powerful witness? What are the contemporary parallels?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson identifies eschatological sobriety, the clear-eyed, theologically grounded assessment of the present age that refuses both triumphalism and despair, as one of the key theological virtues of the inter-advent age. Where do you see the failure of eschatological sobriety in the contemporary evangelical church, both in the direction of over-realized eschatology (triumphalism) and under-realized eschatology (despair)? Which of these two failures do you find more prevalent in your own congregational context, and what specific corrective does this lesson provide?
- The lesson closes with the assertion that the church's mission does not pause for the not-yet but advances through it. What specific forms of kingdom faithfulness in the inter-advent age does your congregation currently practice well? What is underdeveloped or absent? Using the framework of Revelation 12:11, the blood, the testimony, and the willingness to lose the present life for the sake of the King, evaluate your congregation's current practice of kingdom mission and identify one specific area for growth.
- As Lesson 9 turns to the kingdom's consummation at the return of Christ, what tension from this lesson are you carrying forward? The already of Lesson 7 and the not-yet of Lesson 8 together define the eschatological space in which the church lives. Where do you feel that tension most acutely in your own life and ministry right now? Name it honestly, and bring it into Lesson 9 as a companion question to the study of the consummation.

Prayer Focus

Open this prayer time by reading Romans 8:22–25 aloud together, slowly: "For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it." Pause after the reading. Give the congregation a moment to feel the groaning. Not to suppress it, not to explain it away, but to feel it honestly, the specific, personal, aching not-yet that each person carries into this room. And then gently, with pastoral intention, introduce the hope: in hope we have been saved. The groan is held within the hope. The birth pain is oriented toward the birth. The waiting is waiting for something that is certainly coming.

Pray for those in the congregation who are currently in the most acute experience of the not-yet, those whose suffering feels most out of proportion with the "already" of the kingdom they have been told has arrived. Those whose faith is being tested by the apparent silence of God in the middle of their fiery ordeal. Those who are experiencing the apostasy of loved ones who once professed faith and have turned away. Those who are enduring the specific tribulation that comes from bearing the name of Christ in relationships, workplaces, or communities that have become hostile to that name. Pray Romans 8:18 specifically over them: the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to you. Name the glory. Make it specific. Let the hope have content.

Pray for the congregation's posture toward suffering, specifically, that the community would develop the capacity to be genuinely, biblically unsurprised by tribulation. Pray that the teaching of this lesson would do its eschatological work: calibrating expectation, shaping interpretation, rooting the community deeply enough in the New Testament's honest account of the inter-advent age that no manifestation of the not-yet can destabilize the community's fundamental confidence in the Lamb who has overcome the world. Pray for the virtue of hypomone, not as a human achievement but as a Spirit-given capacity, to be cultivated in the congregation through the coming weeks and months of ordinary inter-advent life.

Pray for the missionaries, evangelists, and gospel workers who are carrying the treasure of the gospel in earthen vessels in some of the most difficult contexts in the world, those who are enduring the most intense forms of the tribulation that Jesus promised, those whose work appears to be producing little visible fruit but who are remaining faithful to the word of their testimony. Pray Revelation 12:11 over them: they will overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony. The blood is sufficient. The testimony is powerful. The dragon's time is short. And the One who sends them is coming to vindicate every ounce of their faithful, costly witness.

Close by reading Revelation 12:10–11 aloud one more time as a congregational declaration: "Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down. And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death." Let the congregation hear it as what it is: the proclamation of the heavenly community over the very conflict they are currently engaged in. The accuser has been thrown down. The kingdom has come. The victory is secured. The not-yet is real, but so is the already. And the already is greater.

> *"And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death."*
>
> **Revelation 12:11, NASB 1995**

Key Texts: *John 16:33; Romans 8:18–25; 2 Timothy 3:1–5, 12; Matthew 24:9–14; 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12; 1 Peter 4:12–17; Revelation 12:10–12*

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Dr. Joshua Nichols

josh@faithfultotheword.com | faithfultotheword.com