

The Innumerable Multitude

by Staff

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In the Worldwide Church of God (WCG), most generally presumed that the 144,000 represented "Philadelphia," so we eagerly watched the Feast attendance figures as they climbed toward the magic number. This led us to think that the innumerable multitude (Revelation 7:9-17) was "Laodicea," which would repent during the three-and-a-half years of Great Tribulation just before Christ's return.

The WCG, however, never reached anywhere near 144,000 converted people. At least one-third were children, some were visitors, many were tares, and others fell away. The sifting continues to this day.

In an earlier article we saw that the *firstfruits* are the 144,000. They apparently comprise the entirety of the first resurrection, including all those who have qualified from both Old and New Testament churches. If this is the case, the innumerable multitude cannot be the Laodicean church era because the repentant Laodiceans are part of the 144,000. Revelation 3:20-21 clearly shows them accepting eternal reward at the return of Christ.

The innumerable multitude, then, has to be some other group beyond the first resurrection.

Does It Matter?

Other than for curiosity, is there a real need for us to understand this?

One of the main reasons it is important is the danger that arises from assuming the innumerable multitude are the Laodiceans. If we know only 144,000 make the first resurrection, we know that it will require diligent effort to ensure we are included in this exclusive number!

If we assume an uncountable number of Laodiceans will be purified in the Tribulation and qualify for the Kingdom of God, we can subconsciously feel safe in numbers—that we can slip in unnoticed as part of such a large crowd! It gives us an excuse to put off growth until later.

To substantiate that this multitude is the Laodicean era, some have advanced a theory that the innumerable multitude does not have to be a large number of people. The theory says that the Greek words allow for this number to be three or more. For example, Matthew calls the comparatively small group of men who took Christ into custody a "great" or "innumerable" multitude (Matthew 26:47). The idea is that *innumerable* simply means "uncountable," since we cannot know the *exact* number who will be there.

It is true that these Greek words can convey—and do in other contexts—small groups of people, indeterminate in number. However, these words can also mean millions or billions of people. Setting and context determine what size group is meant in each case.

Does a small, uncountable number fit the context of Revelation and the plan of God outlined in the Holy Days? Once we determine who these people are, then the understanding of numbers will fall into line.

Under Judgment

Revelation 7:1-8 describes the 144,000, then verse 9 begins with "after these things." This is simply a time marker in John's vision, not in prophetic time. It means afterward, later, John saw an innumerable multitude. The Greek does not say that the events of Revelation 7:9-17 immediately follow or that they are part of the preceding information—only that John received this information *after* the previous information. Perhaps it *could* follow right after, but the Greek does not require it.

John says "no one could number" this multitude (verse 9). Why? Notice that this multitude is comprised "of all nations, tribes, peoples and tongues." That would seem to be a great many people! The context indicates a large number, not just an indeterminate one.

John sees these people "standing *before* the throne and *before* the Lamb"—not with Him *on* the throne ruling, but *before* the throne in judgment. Remember, judgment occurs over a period of time. The firstfruits have already been judged and have risen at Christ's return, so this multitude has to be people in a different group who are judged later.

Revelation 3:21, written directly to Laodicea, says God grants overcomers the reward of sitting with Him *on His throne*! Thus, they have qualified to be in the first resurrection, having been judged to be worthy *now* (I Peter 4:17). We have already seen that whether we die in Christ or are still alive, we are "changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet" (I Corinthians 15:51-52) as firstfruits. None of those in the first resurrection will stand "before the throne" for judgment when He returns, for we are currently under judgment, which God will complete and reward us at His Son's return (Revelation 11:18).

This multitude, then, cannot be in the first resurrection! In the process of judgment, they have donned white robes, a growth in spirituality that takes considerable time. *When* is their process of judgment? We borrowed the idea from Protestantism that the innumerable multitude must be part of the first resurrection. Understand, however, that the Protestant world misunderstands the order of the resurrections. They think that at the return of Christ, He judges everyone immediately, and they go either to heaven or hell!

Second, Not First

In Revelation 7:13, one of the elders from God's throne rhetorically wonders who they are and where they come from. There would be no mystery if they were the firstfruits! He answers, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (verse 14). Notice it does not say they had their robes washed *in* tribulation, but only that they had come *out of* tribulation! Which tribulation?

We will examine the meaning of "great tribulation" in more detail below, for it has a bearing on when these people suffered. Surprisingly, it may not be the 3½ years we call "the great tribulation" just before Christ returns! Leave room to consider these people in the great multitude may have come out of tribulation, *then* washed their robes once offered salvation and judgment.

First, let's examine more of the characteristics of these people. Notice that verse 15 says that once made white, they will serve *before* the throne, not sit *on* it. This service will occur "in His temple." They are not the temple, as are the firstfruits, but serving in it.

Verse 17 is important to understand. The Lamb "*will* shepherd them and lead them" and "*will* wipe away every tear from their eyes." This sounds like Revelation 21-22 where God offers salvation to the previously uncalled masses. By this time, the firstfruits will have been changed and married to Christ for a thousand years. They will not need to have their tears dried, yet this great multitude appears ready to have or are in the process of having this done. As they don garments of righteousness, this godly peace becomes available to them.

This must occur *after* the 144,000 of the first resurrection are sealed, as we saw in verse 9. It seems clear that the innumerable multitude rises in the second, not the first resurrection!

Great Tribulation

The term "great tribulation" is what led many to believe the innumerable multitude were Laodiceans coming out of what we have called "the Great Tribulation" before Christ's return. Some have thought and taught that these people represent the Laodicean church who are made white in tribulation. Can this be?

No! The Laodiceans are included in the firstfruits, the first resurrection, the 144,000!

Notice Revelation 3:18-21. Verse 20 uses the same imagery as the Song of Songs. Christ knocks on His bride's door. Those who open the door for Him will "dine with Him." This sounds like Christ coming to His bride and sharing the wedding supper with her. But only the 144,000 are the bride.

The original church at Laodicea contained members of the firstfruits just as the end-time Laodicean church contains firstfruits who are changed at the return of Christ. Therefore, the innumerable multitude cannot be composed of end-time Laodiceans made white in the Great Tribulation.

Those Laodiceans martyred to prove their faithfulness will be included in the first resurrection as firstfruits, as part of the 144,000, since that is all that are resurrected at the return of Christ. They are "dead in Christ" like any other martyrs (Revelation 6:9) and rise first (I Thessalonians 4:16-17).

If the great multitude are not purified Laodiceans, then who are they?

A possible answer begins to form if we carefully define and broaden our view of "the great tribulation." We have often called the 3½ years of tribulation just before Christ's return as the Great Tribulation. Is tribulation limited to that? We read Matthew 24:21 describing great tribulation just before Christ returns and have assumed it is the same time as Revelation 7:14 describing the innumerable multitude who came out of tribulation. Though there is some overlap this may not be entirely true!

"Great tribulation"—formed from two Greek words, *thlipsis*, "tribulation" and *megale*, "great"—is used four times in the New Testament:

- » Matthew 24:21: For then there will be *great tribulation*, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be.
- » Acts 7:11: Now a famine and *great trouble* came over all the land of Egypt and Canaan, and our fathers found no sustenance.
- » Revelation 2:22: Indeed, I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into *great tribulation*, unless they repent of their deeds.

» Revelation 7:14: . . . These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

In the first three passages, the Greek contains no definite article ("the"). In the verse in Acts, Luke calls the drought in Egypt "great trouble." Jesus refers to the problems of the Thyatira era as "great tribulation," using the exact words as in Matthew 24:21 to describe the end-time trouble. Neither seems to confine "great tribulation" only to the specific 3½-year period at the end of the age or any specific tribulation.

In Revelation 7:14, John uses it differently. Here, the Greek reads *ek tes thlipsis tes megales* or "out of *the* great tribulation." It is in present tense and should read, "These are those coming out of the great tribulation." On seeing this, Protestant commentators had no place to go for similar wording and context than to Matthew 24:21, where Christ describes conditions just before His return as the worst time of tribulation ever to come on the world.

Christ's description, however, is not a title; He does not use the specific article. He merely refers to a condition that would then be occurring. Not understanding the order of the resurrections, the Protestant commentators could only conclude Christ and John spoke of the same event.

But were they? The name, "the Great Tribulation," did not come to us from the Bible, but from Protestant commentators who erroneously matched Matthew 24:21 with Revelation 7:14 and put their own name or title on it.

All these uses of *thlipsis megale* show conditions of great stress on man, but they do not show the duration as being 3½ years. Other verses may indicate this is true of Matthew 24:21, referring to that period just before Christ's return, but not true of the other three passages.

Notice further that Christ uses "tribulation" but not "great tribulation" in Matthew 24:29, speaking of "the tribulation of those days." His wording allows for other tribulations in other days. He uses "of those days" to show *which* tribulation He is discussing. This shows He did not place a title on this event. Otherwise, He would have used the specific article, naming it "the Great Tribulation."

We can further demonstrate this in the other gospels. When Mark describes the same event, he does not even use "great" at all (Mark 13:19)! Mark, too, does not name this time period, but simply describes the events. Verse 24 parallels Matthew 24:29, with Mark writing, "after *that* tribulation."

The term "great tribulation" can refer to many biblical events, situations and times, so the writers specify the time element when they refer to great tribulation. Luke 21:23 even uses a different word to describe the end-time tribulation: *anagke megale* ("great distress"). It should be obvious by now that if "great tribulation" was a name for a specific event in the Bible, Luke would have used it.

To use a modern analogy, when we speak of "*the* Super Bowl," it refers to a specific event. Speaking generally, we would say "a football game," and if we meant a specific game, we would define when and where. This is what the biblical authors did, so we would not mistake to which of the great tribulations or distresses they referred.

The Great Tribulation

The Bible itself does not name *any* event "*the* great tribulation" except in Revelation 7:14, which refers to a time after the 144,000 are sealed, redeemed and changed to spirit. The setting is a time *after* Christ returns, *after* the first resurrection. During this time people are donning white robes, standing before the judgment seat, having their opportunity for salvation.

As we saw earlier, biblical judgment is always spread over the time of a person's conversion. The firstfruits are judged during their converted life on earth until death or Christ returns. Those in the Millennium are also judged over their lives, as are those in the Great White Throne Judgment. They have time to show and perfect their conversion under the trials and stresses of life.

This leads us to consider that "the Great Tribulation" *includes* the last 3½ years of tribulation terminating at Christ's return, but is much broader than that! It appears to include the whole 6,000 years of tribulation man has experienced. Thus, the Bible writers can refer to "great tribulation" and then describe *which part of it* they mean.

As Christ said, the last 3½ years of "the Great Tribulation" is the worst of it, but if the innumerable multitude are those who lived through all ages and rise in the second resurrection, God is resurrecting them from all phases of the great tribulation that lasted 6,000 years! "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation." This is why only John uses the full specific name for "the Great Tribulation." Only he refers to the whole 6,000 years and the people coming out of it. The rest, including Christ, only refer to shorter, specific segments of this Great Tribulation.

All Christians enter into life "through many tribulations" (Acts 14:22). Satan has ruled the world for 6,000 years, and *all* of it has been fraught with famine, war, disease, miscarriage, deformity, accidents, heartache, tears, biting insects, poisonous snakes, fear, ignorance and hard times of every description. When God told Adam and Eve they would make a living by the sweat of their brow, He meant it! Life has always been a great tribulation.

Perhaps because we have had such good times for a few decades in America, we do not comprehend this, but even as we wallow in affluence, constant wars, famines, epidemics and the like are happening all over the world. Our so-called "great society" is dying from cancer, heart attacks, diabetes, addictions, all kinds of stress-related illnesses, car accidents and murders. We live under fear of an economic meltdown or a nuclear holocaust, and these things *will* happen.

If you wish to call the last 3½ years "the Great Tribulation," it certainly is the worst 3½ years of this 6,000-year tribulation Satan has put man through. It is not a name Christ put on the last 3½ years, but one John put on a 6,000-year period from which the innumerable multitude will come out.

Once we understand that the first resurrection is only 144,000 people, the great multitude has to fit somewhere else. Considering the plan of God, the second resurrection is the logical place. Those who live into the Millennium may also be included, for they will have come out of the very end of the 6,000 years of tribulation. Once converted, they will also have a time of judgment.

Crunching the Numbers

Does John call this innumerable multitude uncountable because the number of people is variable or because it is simply an overwhelming number of people? To figure this out, let's crunch some numbers.

Remember that John could count a 200,000,000 man army (Revelation 9:16) and could count 100,000,000 plus thousands of thousands of angels, beasts and elders (Revelation 5:11). Yet no man could number this great multitude. God could, for He can count the number of hairs on all our heads.

How many people will survive the coming holocaust and remain when Christ returns? There will be great destruction. Revelation 6 shows the angels being given authority to kill great masses of people—in one case one-fourth and in another one-third of men with plenty of mayhem in between! We cannot forget the seven last plagues after a year of the Day of the Lord! Isaiah 24:6 avows that the earth will be "desolate . . . and few men are left." Isaiah 6:13 shows that only a tenth of Israel will remain, and Isaiah 1:9 and Ezekiel 5 indicate only "a very small remnant." Unless this time is shortened, no flesh would be saved alive (Matthew 24:22)!

All the earth's population is "numerable" or countable at that time. By the process of elimination, who is left to comprise the innumerable multitude?

The first resurrection numbers 144,000, and just "a very small remnant" survives into the Millennium. Only one category of people remains who lived, died and has yet had no opportunity for salvation. They are those scheduled for the Great White Throne Judgment (Ezekiel 37; Revelation 20: 5), both of Israel and "the rest of the dead."

Scientists have estimated that 50-60 billion people have lived since Adam. Now *that* is a great, uncountable, unimaginable number—truly innumerable to any human being! We cannot imagine a billion, let alone 50 or 60 billion. These people, whom God resurrects all at once, lived through all phases of the 6,000 years of "the Great Tribulation."

No wonder only John hangs that name on this specific event! He could number 100 or 200 million. Daniel could number 100 million (Daniel 7:10), but this figure in Revelation 7:9 was absolutely overwhelming! *Thlipsis megale* has been visited on billions of people during Satan's 6,000 year rule. These people will have all gone through great tribulation, great distress, great trouble in life.

They will all have their chance for salvation in a wonderful environment without Satan's influence. That is why they serve "before the throne," for being judged. Once they prove their commitment to God's way of life over a time, they will be changed into immortal spirit beings. No wonder their tears will be dried—no wonder they will have no more pain!

John 3:16 Fulfilled

Once we examine how the Bible writers use "great tribulation," we can begin to see a much broader application. It encompasses the whole time of man's history under the domination of the Adversary, Satan the Devil. Those who live and die within it, never receiving the opportunity for salvation, will rise in the Great White Throne Judgment. We do not know the exact number of people involved, so in that sense they are "innumerable," but it is also an unfathomable billions of people, a number beyond our comprehension.

The innumerable multitude reaches far beyond "a few Laodiceans" who repent in the last 3½ years. The Laodiceans will be accounted for in the first resurrection as firstfruits. True, some will not go to a place of safety, having been left behind for the Devil to persecute (Revelation 12:17). They will either repent in tribulation and martyrdom and meet Christ in the air, or go into the Lake of Fire in the third resurrection.

During the Millennium Christ sits down to rule and judge those who physically live into it. "After these things" He will judge those who come out of the Great Tribulation, the innumerable multitude in the Great White Throne Judgment. Only then will John 3:16 come into its ultimate fulfillment:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.