

A Sealed People

Revelation 7:1-17

One of the privileges of being a Christian is that we have access to the heavenly throne and may approach the God of the Universe as our loving Father. He owns the cattle on a thousand hills and so orders all things for the benefit of His children.

While this is absolutely true, it is also true that in this life our Father does not give us special treatment. Believers must live in the same fallen world as unbelievers. The four horsemen of Revelation 6 are forces that exist throughout this world throughout all of history. Christians are not exempt from war, and disease, and economic hardship, and death. And Christians must all endure persecution in one form or another.

It is while we are suffering the same effects of living in this fallen world as those without Christ, that we are commissioned by God to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to those who are lost.

It is the awareness of the coming Final Judgment that drives us to our need of Christ.

Revelation 6:17 ¹⁷ for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

Through faith alone in Christ alone will we be able to stand in the Final Judgment.

But the many trials of this world challenge our faith, and often threaten to undo it. The need is not so much to have once believed, but for us to endure in our faith until the day of Christ's coming.

And so, it is as our faith is in countless ways attacked and weakened that we need encouragement that Jesus is both the Author and the Finisher of our faith. We need confidence that He will overcome our tendency towards unbelief and will enable us to endure to the end.

Jesus does this very thing in Revelation 7.

Even while Jesus takes His people through the many storms of life, He is also working to ensure that the storms do not consume their faith.

WCF 12.1 All those that are justified (by faith alone – my addition). God vouchsafeth, in and for His only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption:(1) by which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God;(2) have His name put upon them,(3) receive the Spirit of adoption;(4) have access to the throne of grace with boldness;(5) are enabled to cry, Abba, Father;(6) are pitied,(7) protected,(8) provided for,(9) and chastened by Him as by a Father;(10) yet never cast off,(11) but sealed to the day of redemption,(12) and inherit the promises,(13) as heirs of everlasting salvation.(14)

Vouchsafeth = to graciously grant something to someone

There are many things that are vouchsafed in this statement.
But the one that most concerns us today is God's gracious "sealing".

God "seals" all those who are justified by faith alone.

In Chapter 7, we are given two distinct pictures of the Church, the whole Church.

Contextually, chapter 7 is an interlude squashed between the 6th and 7th seals. The 7th seal will be opened in chapter 8.

The 7 seals function like padlocks that only Jesus is worthy to open. Only Jesus controls history, and with that the redemption of His Bride, the Church.

We will see in this chapter that Jesus not only has the authority to open the seals, but He also has the ability to place His own seal on His own people. In this way, Jesus places a lock over His people, to guarantee they are kept safe.

It is this seal that we will explore today.

Read Rev. 7:1-8.

After this
I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth,
holding back the four winds of the earth,
that no wind might blow
on earth or sea
or against any tree.

"After this" should not be taken chronologically in time, but rather in the time of the vision.

What are the four angels doing?
They are holding back the four winds of the earth.

What do the four winds symbolize?
They are forces of God's judgment. These forces are already happening in part but will culminate in the Final Judgment at the Coming of Christ.

What is the reason why these angels are holding back these winds?
To allow time for the putting of a seal on the forehead of each servant of God.

2 Then
I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun,
with the seal of the living God,
and
he called with a loud voice
to the four angels
who had been given power
to harm earth and sea,
3 saying,
"Do not harm

the earth
or
the sea
or
the trees,
until we have sealed the servants of our God
on their foreheads."

The angel who has the seal applies it according to the will of the Lamb.
Before the angels can unleash their destruction, this angel must apply the seal.

This is not the first time in biblical history that God has "sealed" His people.
Before the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC, God gave to the prophet Ezekiel a vision
in which He commanded His angel to put a mark (seal) on the foreheads of those living
in the city who grieved the evils committed in the city.

Ezekiel 9:4-5 ⁴ And the LORD said to him, "Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on
the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it." ⁵ And to
the others he said in my hearing, "Pass through the city after him, and strike. Your eye shall not spare,
and you shall show no pity.

The message of Ezekiel anticipates what we see here in Revelation. God is making
sure to mark all those who truly belong to Him before He calls them to the trials of life,
and the Final Judgment.

In the vision of Revelation, this may have been some form of visible mark. But this
visionary seal depicts a spiritual seal given to every true believer.

2 Corinthians 1:21-22 ²¹ And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, ²²
and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.

Ephesians 1:13-14 ¹³ In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation,
and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance
until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Ephesians 4:30 ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of
redemption.

In each of these verses, the Holy Spirit seals the believer as a means of guaranteeing
safe passage in this life and through the Judgment.

The seal is given for the purpose of "security" for the entire people of God.

4 And
 I heard the number of the sealed,
 144,000,
 sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel:
5 12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed,
 12,000 from the tribe of Reuben,
 12,000 from the tribe of Gad,
6 12,000 from the tribe of Asher,
 12,000 from the tribe of Naphtali,

7 12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh,
 12,000 from the tribe of Simeon,
 12,000 from the tribe of Levi,
8 12,000 from the tribe of Issachar,
 12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun,
 12,000 from the tribe of Joseph,
 12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed.

Why would God portray the entire Church using a picture of only 144,000?

Before I try to answer that question, let's look at some changes in the 12 Tribes from the book of Genesis.

Judah is given first place to give honor to Jesus who is the lion of the tribe of Judah. No problem there.

The next oddity has to do with the tribe of Joseph and the tribe of Manasseh being listed together.

During the time of the Genesis and Exodus, God purposely splits the tribe of Joseph in two tribes: Ephraim and Manasseh.

These are Joseph's sons, and so, he is given a double inheritance.

This would result in there being 13 Tribes.

But since God intended to choose the Tribe of Levi for special service as priests and temple servants, they would not be given an inheritance in the Land.

Therefore, the Land would remain divided into 12 parcels.

The tribe of Ephraim is omitted completely.

This is unique in Scripture. Everywhere else, if Joseph is mentioned as a tribe, it is assumed that Ephraim and Manasseh are both included. If Ephraim and Manasseh are mentioned, then it is assumed that they both represent Joseph and Joseph is not mentioned.

To have one of Joseph's sons mentioned as a tribe along with Joseph also being a tribe is odd. We are not given any explanation as to why this is the case.

It is also "odd" that Levi is re-inserted with the other tribes.

She is no longer distinct from the other tribes.

This is probably due to Jesus being the One Great High Priest and all believers becoming a "kingdom of priests".

The final oddity is that the tribe of Dan is omitted.

So, in a picture of "all Israel" being sealed, there is at least one whole tribe, and possibly part of another, that is missing.

We are given no explanation.

We are being forced to reconcile how some can be missing and yet there is no one missing.

Something similar occurs with the Apostles. There are twelve Apostles. But one of them, Judas Iscariot, betrays Jesus and never repents. Judas has been lost. We might just conclude that this is life: you win some and you lose some.

But this is not good enough for Jesus. He has purchased His Church with His own blood. He has bought them. And He will lose none of those whom He bought.

John 6:37-39 ³⁷ All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.

Jesus made sure before He was betrayed to explain to His disciples that Judas was appointed to betray Him. Jesus wants His disciples to be very clear that He did not “lose” Judas.

The Apostles understood this. And so, after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, they, being led by the Holy Spirit, made sure to appoint another apostle to take Judas’ place.

Matthias was chosen to symbolize that Jesus’ death was intended for all God’s people. All Israel... the whole Church... all that the Father had given to Jesus... would be redeemed.

They were expressing their faith in the completeness of Jesus’ work on the cross. His work on the cross would redeem “all God’s people”. None would be lost.

And yet, the Church Militant loses members all the time. People abandon Christ. We feel the heartache of loved ones who do not believe. It feels to us here on earth like the Church in heaven will be missing those who should be there.

I want to flesh this out a bit.

If the loved ones who do not believe, or who abandon their faith, are close enough to us, we may even wonder how heaven can be full of joy without their presence.

Paul wrestles with this in Romans 9. He even wishes that he might be cut off from Christ for the sake of those whom he loves...

We are called to plead with God for the redemption of those we love. An unbelieving spouse, a child who abandons the faith, a parent who stubbornly refuses to believe, a lifelong friend who does not feel their need of Christ... Until a person breathes their last breath, we are to ask God to extend sovereign mercy to them such that they will repent and believe.

And truth be told, we are all in a life and death struggle to continue in the faith. Temptations to quit believing face us every day. Apostasy is an ever-present reality.

It is into these hard realities that God speaks. He wants us to know His perspective so that we might have confidence and assurance in our daily struggle.

We are to believe that God is sovereign in salvation. The Father has chosen a people for His Son. The Son has purchased this people with His own blood. And the Holy Spirit seals the redemption of this same people. None are lost.

How do we merge the two perspectives?

How do we live with the sense of loss and the confidence that Jesus will lose none?

I am not sure. I just know that we must.

While we live down here, we must live with the heartache of those who will not believe.

But when we arrive in glory, we will not have a sense that there are holes in the ranks.

One of the deepest heartaches of any believer is watching a loved one in unbelief. God obviously wants His children to experience this heartache. Otherwise, it would not happen so often.

Deep Tension. God does not want you to harden your heart to your loved one. Paul does not harden his heart to his fellow Jews. Jesus wept over unbelieving Jerusalem before the crucifixion. There is something divine about the heartache we feel over loved ones. There is a fellowship with God that we experience in our pain.

But, we are also called to submit our hearts to the sovereign goodness of our Lord. God is not obligated to save anyone. If He were, that person would not be saved according to mercy. We must all come to the place where we acknowledge to God that He is good even if He does not extend mercy to our loved one. This is different than a cold acceptance of fate, or an admission that men have absolute freedom that God is not allowed to violate. No, we believe that when God chooses to save, He has the power to save. He can overcome all our stubborn unbelief.

This is an acceptance that God is good, even if He chooses not to save the one we so much want to be saved. And it is a choice to believe that eternity will be perfect anyway.

The believer cannot say, "If God will not save my loved one, then I don't want the redemption He offers for myself either."

The truth is that we cannot understand the details of what it will be like to live in heavenly glory throughout all eternity. We know just enough to whet our appetites, but not enough to satisfy every curiosity.

Somehow, in heavenly glory, the Church is not missing anyone. She is perfect. The perfection of the entire Church for whom Jesus shed His blood is the point of the 144,000.

144,000 represents perfection, the entirety of God's elect.

To begin, try to think of an army on parade.

Before an army goes into battle, each regiment, each division, has its full complement of soldiers.

But what happens after that same army endures its first engagement?

What was once a full complement, now is reduced by injuries and fatalities.

But here in Revelation, the full army is secured with a seal.

The purpose of the seal is to guarantee that none will be lost.

Each division will continue to have its full complement even after it has fought the war.

The connection to Israel being an army can be seen as Joshua led them into the Promised Land. One thousand was a typical way of describing a division in the army.

We arrive at 144 by multiplying 12×12 . The Church is not only made up of the 12 Tribes, but also includes the Gentiles under the 12 Apostles.

$12 \times 12 \times 1,000 = 144,000$.

Since each tribe is designated by 1,000 this makes the most sense to me.

But I also think it may be that 1,000 is derived from $10 \times 10 \times 10$.

It just so happens that these are the dimensions of the Holy of Holies of the Tabernacle. I admit that this is a bit more of a stretch. But the imagery of the Tabernacle and Temple, and God's people being "living stones" of the heavenly Temple, is used all over the NT and in Revelation especially.

These figures correlate closely with the city of God which is found in Rev. 21.

- 12 gates – names of the 12 tribes
- wall = 144 cubits
- 12 foundation stones = names of 12 apostles
- 12,000 stadia in length
- 12,000 stadia in width
- 12,000 stadia in height

It is best to see the 144,000 as a picture of the perfection of the entire Church being saved, all whom the Father gave to the Son.

It is the "sealing" of the Church that guarantees the Redemption of the Church.

The seal is given to enable the believers to persevere through the tribulations explained in chapter 6.

And we are told of this seal to encourage us in the struggle.

Saints who suffer in the tribulation are encouraged to persevere as they reflect on the divine protection they have through God's sealing.

It is because of the seal that the tribulations do not work to destroy the believers' faith. Rather, they work to strengthen the faith of the believer.

Have you ever wondered why in some people the trials of life destroy their faith and in others their faith remains?

The seal of God makes the difference.

Why does Peter repent and turn back to Jesus and Judas does not?

Jesus told Peter why, "I have prayed for you."

Jesus secures the faith of all His people.

All of God's elect, given to Christ, are placed into the hand of Christ. And no one will be able to snatch them out of His hand.

"Although they may suffer and even lose their physical life, the seal protects them from losing their spiritual life with God. This is why the seal is said to be "from the living God"..." Beale.

Hendrikson calls the seal "the most precious thing under heaven".

Immediately after portraying the Church in language of perfection and completeness, John is given another picture of the same Church.

Read Rev. 7:9-12.

9 After this
I looked, and behold,
 a great multitude
 that no one could number,
 from every nation,
 from all tribes and peoples and languages,
standing
 before the throne
 and
 before the Lamb,
clothed in white robes,
 with palm branches in their hands,
10 and
 crying out with a loud voice,
 "Salvation belongs
 to our God
 who sits on the throne,
 and

to the Lamb!"

11 And
all the angels were standing
 around the throne
 and
 around the elders and the four living creatures,
 and
they fell on their faces
 before the throne
 and
 worshiped God,
12 saying,
 "Amen!
 Blessing
 and glory
 and wisdom
 and thanksgiving
 and honor
 and power
 and might
 be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

This is a second picture of the same Church.

The first vision sees the Church as complete – missing no members.

The second vision sees the Church as a vast multitude which no one can count. This picture portrays the Church, not as persecuted and killed, but as joyous and victorious.

If we are to endure pain and suffering and loss in this life, we must have assurance that they will all have an end. The destiny of the Church is not one of a tiny band of believers struggling to survive. The destiny of the Church is a vast multitude, like the grains of sand on the seashore.

The imagery here reminds us of Palm Sunday, and the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.

Whereas the joy of that day was short lived, the Joy of the Church will endure throughout all eternity.

These people have come out of the great tribulation – v. 14. They have endured the many trials of this life and have overcome by the blood of the Lamb.

This vast multitude is redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, but they are also redeemed because God has been faithful to keep His promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Genesis 17:4-5 ⁴ "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.

⁵ No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.

Genesis 32:12 ¹² But you said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'

Revelation 7 gives us two pictures of the whole Church. They are two pictures of God's faithfulness to keep His promises to Abraham.

Read vv. 13-17.

13 Then
 one of the elders addressed me,
 saying,
 "Who are these,
 clothed in white robes,
 and
 from where have they come?"

14 I said to him,
 "Sir, you know."
 And
 he said to me,
 "These are the ones coming 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 They shall hunger no more,
 neither thirst anymore;
 the sun shall not strike them,
 nor any scorching heat.

17 For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
 and
 he will guide them to springs of living water,
 and
 God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

One of the elders asks John "Where did this great multitude come from?"
John answers in the same way that you answer as students who do not want to get the answer wrong: You know.

How does the elder answer his own question?
These are those who have come out of the great tribulation.

This Tribulation has begun already, but is still future in that it continues and may even increase in intensity. The truth is that more people are dying for their faith today than ever before throughout history.

Because these people have been faithful in the midst of great tribulation and have washed their garments in the blood of the Lamb, they now: dwell before the throne of God.

Not only have all our sins been washed away, but so have the pains and heartaches of this present world.

We live in the inner sanctuary; where we enjoy the greatest intimacy possible with Him and with all of God's people and the rest of the Redeemed Creation.

We serve him day and night in his temple. The whole Church can serve God in His presence.

Never again will we hunger.

Never again will we thirst.

These point to the absence of physical trials, but they also point to our soul finally experiencing the fullness for which it longs.

The scorching heat of the Sun will no longer beat upon us.

The Lamb will be our shepherd.

He will lead us to springs of living water.

And God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

"If there is one text in Scripture that comforts the saints, it is this verse. Here we meet the infinite tenderness of our God, who is able to remove from our eyes every tear caused by suffering, death, and sorrow." Kistemaker

Jesus loves you.

He gives you these pictures in Revelation 7 to encourage you, to help you believe that He loves you even as you are experiencing the most heart-wrenching trials in this life.

He wants you to know about the sealing, even though you cannot physically see it or feel it.

He wants you to know that it exists so that your faith will not rest in your own strength.

You are called to believe, to keep believing to the end.

But your assurance that you will believe to the end is not in yourself, but rather in the sovereign hand of the One who bought you with His own blood, and in the working of the Holy Spirit deep in your soul.

And the future of those who belong to Jesus has no down-side. There are no thorns on the rose. My mind cannot conceive of this. But it is that for which my soul yearns.

Peace with my God and Savior.

Peace with the entirety of God's people.

Peace with the entirety of God's creation.

This is what the love of God, and the blood of Christ, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit vouchsafeth to you who believe.

Amen.

