

“SEALED TO STAND BEFORE THE THRONE”

I. Introduction

- A. In Revelation 6, John saw the final judgment being inaugurated at the opening of the sixth seal.
- B. And that chapter ended with the people of the earth crying out in despair in the face of the coming of God’s wrath, saying, “who can stand?”
- C. Chapter 7 is an interlude before the opening of the seventh and final seal, the seal that stands for the consummation of God’s comprehensive plan of judgment and salvation.
- D. In this chapter, we see that, by God’s grace, there are some who will be able to stand when God comes in judgment on the last day.

II. The 144,000 (1-8)

- A. John introduces his description of what he relates in this chapter with the words, “After this.”
 - 1. While this might seem to indicate that the things described here are chronologically after the events that were described in chapter 6, this is not the case.
 - 2. When John says “After this” in Revelation, he is simply referring to the sequence of the visions that he saw.
 - 3. The content of this vision makes it clear that the sealing of the 144,000 actually takes place prior to the opening of the seals.
 - 4. The four winds that are being held back by the four angels are the four horsemen from chapter 6.
 - 5. This is supported by the fact that the four horsemen in John’s vision are modeled after the four chariots in the vision described in

Zechariah 6.

6. In Zechariah's vision, the four chariots are identified with the four winds of the earth.
 7. Listen to Zechariah's description of what he saw in that vision:
"Again I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold, four chariots came out from between two mountains. And the mountains were mountains of bronze. The first chariot had red horses, the second black horses, the third white horses, and the fourth chariot dappled horses—all of them strong. Then I answered and said to the angel who talked with me, 'What are these, my lord?' And the angel answered and said to me, 'These are going out to the four winds of heaven, after presenting themselves before the Lord of all the earth.'" (Zech 6:1–5 ESV)
 8. The fact that the four winds are being held back in Revelation 7 means that this chapter is describing something that takes place prior to the unleashing of the four horsemen in chapter 6.
- B. We saw in our study of chapter 6 that the horsemen were symbolic of the judgments that God sends upon the earth in the time in between Christ's two comings.
1. The reason why the horsemen are being held back in this vision is so that God's seal can be placed upon those whom he has chosen to save.
 2. This seal is symbolic of ownership and spiritual protection.
 3. We find an Old Testament background for this image in Ezekiel 9, where godly Jews are given a mark that protects them from spiritual harm when God sends his judgment upon Jerusalem.
 4. The same idea is seen during the plague on the firstborn in the book of Exodus, the plague that was the basis of the Passover feast.
 5. When the destroyer went throughout the land, those who were inside a house that was marked by the blood of the Passover lamb

were spared.

6. This is what is being symbolized here in Revelation 7.
 7. God is explaining how believers can persevere through the tribulations that are depicted in the opening of the seals.
 8. Though we are not kept from experiencing the calamities that befall this world, we are spiritually preserved as we go through them.
- C. When it comes to the identity of the 144,000, there are five main interpretations among orthodox Christians.
1. Dispensationalists, who believe that God's purposes for Israel are separate from his purposes for the church, say that the 144,000 are a literal number of ethnic Jews who will come to faith in Christ and be physically protected from tribulation after the church's supposed rapture out of the world.
 2. Others say that the 144,000 represent a mass conversion of ethnic Jews just prior to Christ's return.
 3. Others say that the 144,000 are symbolic of a remnant of Jewish Christians who were spared when the temple was destroyed in AD 70.
 4. Preterists, who contend that the bulk of the book of Revelation has to do with the destruction of the temple in AD 70, say that the 144,000 represent the Christians who emerged from that great tragedy.
 5. And others say that the 144,000 are a figurative representation of all of God's people throughout all of history.
- D. There are a number of reasons why I think the last view is to be preferred over the others.
1. First, the fact that the angel in verse 3 calls them "the servants of our God" makes it difficult to see how these could only be made up

of ethnic Jews, since this designation does not refer to Jewish believers alone but to all of God's people.

2. Second, the sealing of these servants is describing the same spiritual reality that Jesus promised to the church in Philadelphia when he said this of the one who conquers: "I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name." (Rev 3:12 ESV)
- E. A third reason that supports seeing this number as symbolic of the whole people of God across all history is the fact that the number 144,000 is the product of $12 \times 12 \times 1,000$.
1. The church under its old covenant administration is represented by Israel's twelve tribes, and the church under its new covenant administration is represented by the twelve apostles, and the multiplication by 1,000 represents the full number of the redeemed.
 2. This is consistent with how the symbols of the twelve tribes and twelve apostles are used in the vision of the New Jerusalem at the end of Revelation.
 3. The city's twelve gates have the names of the twelve tribes written on them, the city's twelve foundations have the names of the twelve apostles written on them, and the wall of the city is 144 cubits high. (see 21:9-17)
- F. A fourth reason for seeing the 144,000 as representative of the whole church across history has to do with the parallel vision that John receives in verses 9-17.
1. As I will explain when we look at those verses later in the sermon, the great multitude that John sees there is the same group as the 144,000 that he sees here in the first part of chapter 7.
 2. And that great multitude is explicitly said to be from every nation, tribe, people, and language.

3. On a related note, the vast number of this multitude means it cannot be limited to a remnant of believers who survived the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.
- G. Lastly, the 144,000 from the tribes of Israel can be seen as representing the entire church because the church is frequently described in the New Testament as the true fruition of all that was promised to Israel.
1. We see this in Galatians 3:29, where Paul says, "if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."
 2. We see it in Ephesians 2:12-13, where Paul says that believing Gentiles have been made part of the commonwealth of Israel.
 3. We see it in Philippians 3:3, where Paul says that believers in Jesus Christ "are the circumcision."
 4. We see it in multiple places in Revelation, as the church is described as a lampstand, as the new Jerusalem, and as a kingdom of priests.
- H. As we look at the list of 12,000 taken from each tribe, a number of things stand out about this list when it is compared to Old Testament tribal lists.
1. For one thing, Judah is listed first, even though Judah was the fourth son born to Jacob.
 2. The reason why Judah is first is because Jesus is from the tribe of Judah.
 3. Another odd thing about this list is that the tribe of Dan is excluded from it.
 4. This may be because Dan was associated with gross idolatry early on in Israel's history.
 5. Joseph's son Manasseh replaces Dan so that the number twelve is preserved.

6. It is also unusual that Gad, Asher, and Naphtali are listed near the beginning of the list.
7. These tribes traced their roots back to the Gentile maids of Rachel and Leah, and thus they are typically listed later in the Old Testament tribal lists.
8. But they are given a more prominent place here, perhaps because they represent the inclusion of Gentiles into the covenant people.
9. Lastly, it is odd that the tribe of Levi is included in this list.
10. In the Old Testament, Levi is left out of the listings that relate to tribal allotments because it was the priestly tribe.
11. The Levites' inheritance was the Lord himself, whom they served in the sanctuary.
12. But here, in this symbolic picture of the church in light of the new covenant, Levi is listed alongside the other tribes because now the entire people of God are a kingdom of priests.

III. The Great Multitude (9-12)

- A. We turn now to verses 9 through 12, where John describes the next vision that he was given.
 1. As I noted earlier, this great multitude should not be seen as a group that is distinct from the 144,000.
 2. In these visions, John is given different ways of looking at the same group of people.
 3. The visions provide different vantage points on the people whom God has redeemed for himself.
 4. The vision of the 144,000 depicts the church as the restored remnant of true spiritual Israel, emphasizing that their salvation is

absolutely certain.

5. The vision of the great multitude shows the church as a vast assembly gathered from all nations.
 6. It is the same group, described from different perspectives.
- B. The picture of the church as a great multitude drawn from all nations marks the fulfillment of the promise that God made to Israel's patriarchs.
1. In Genesis 17, God told Abraham, "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations." (Gen 17:4 ESV)
 2. In Genesis 22, God said to Abraham, "I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore." (Gen 22:17 ESV)
 3. And in Genesis 32, Jacob says that God gave him this promise: "I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude." (Gen 32:12 ESV)
 4. Of course, when Scripture says that this group cannot be numbered, it is speaking from a human perspective.
 5. Though they cannot be numbered by man, God certainly knows their number.
 6. That was the whole point of the sealing of God's servants in the previous vision.
 7. Not one of those upon whom God has placed his seal will be lost.
 8. All of the elect will be saved.
 9. As Paul wrote to Timothy, "God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: 'The Lord knows those who are his.'" (2 Tim 2:19 ESV)

10. This should be a great encouragement to us in our witness.
 11. Though we ourselves could never persuade anyone to trust in Christ, God works through the ministry of his church and the witness of his saints to bring great multitudes of people to saving faith.
 12. God is saving people from all over the earth, and every single one of those who are his will come to Christ.
- C. Notice that John says that the great multitude is “standing before the throne and before the Lamb.”
1. Here we see an explicit connection between the things that John sees in these visions and what he saw at the opening of the first six seals.
 2. This is the answer to the question that was posed by those who were terrified by the coming of the day of judgment, saying, “who can stand?”
 3. Though the wicked will not stand on the day of judgment, the redeemed of the Lord will.
- D. The reason why the saints in this vision have palm branches in their hands is because this marks the fulfillment of what was foreshadowed by the Feast of Booths.
1. In Leviticus 23 the people of Israel were told to use palm branches as part of the celebration of that feast.
 2. The vision that John describes here is depicting the celebration of the eschatological Feast of Booths.
 3. God’s people are rejoicing in their deliverance from the house of bondage, their preservation through the wilderness of this world, and their entrance into the heavenly land of promise.

4. And notice that as they celebrate this, they ascribe their salvation entirely to God and to the Lamb.
5. God alone receives all the glory for our salvation, because it is entirely of him.
6. In the words of one commentator, "In its origin, its execution, its application, its progress, and its final consummation, salvation is of God. It is God's to save; it is man's only to be saved. The sinner has nothing to do in the whole process, but to receive, and use, and enjoy the free and matchless grace." [Ramsay, 327]

IV. The Great Tribulation (13-17)

- A. This brings us to the third and final part of our text, which begins in verse 13.
 1. John tells us that in the midst of this vision, one of the elders comes up to him and asks him a question, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?"
 2. Then the elder answers his own question, telling John that these are the ones who have come out of the great tribulation.
 3. The phrase "great tribulation" is another element in this passage that has been understood in various ways by different interpreters.
 4. Some see this as pointing exclusively to a period of intense persecution that will come at the very end of history, just before the return of Christ.
 5. Others argue that this is describing the terrible fate that befell Jerusalem when the Romans besieged the city and ultimately destroyed the temple in AD 70.
 6. The problem with those views is that they fail to give proper attention to the fact that this phrase appears in a visionary cycle in which the entire period between Christ's first and second comings

is depicted as an age of tribulation.

7. This was the main point conveyed by the four horsemen of the apocalypse at the beginning of chapter 6, and by the cry of the martyrs at the opening of the fifth seal.
 8. Also, the great tribulation cannot be something that is exclusive to the future because in chapter 1 John identified himself to his readers as “your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus.”
 9. As for the claim that this great tribulation was exclusive to the first century, the fact that later ages have seen far greater persecution argues strongly against this.
 10. The reason why this tribulation is called “great” is because it covers a great period of time.
 11. From the time of Christ’s ascension all the way up until his return in glory, the church faces trouble and opposition in this world.
- B. Chapter 7 concludes with a beautiful description of the blessings that we possess as believers.
1. We have washed our filthy garments in the blood of Christ and made them as white as snow.
 2. This image is representative of our entire salvation, from our justification to our sanctification to our glorification.
 3. And because we have been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb, we have fellowship with God.
 4. While we enjoy this in a certain sense even now, the great future that lies in store for us will be the ultimate fulfillment of what David longed for when he prayed in Psalm 27, “One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty

of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.”

5. When we enter into God’s presence in glory, we will be forever freed from all suffering and sorrow, and we will know the blessing of being under the perfect rule and care of the Lamb of God.
6. What an encouragement this is to us as we persevere through the trials and troubles of this life.
7. In the words of James Ramsay, “For the comfort of the struggling believer, the whole of these overwhelming glories are brought into striking contrast with the tribulations through which they have passed, and by which they have been prepared for it, thus uniting in one the sorrowing and the triumphant church.” [328]

V. Conclusion

- A. God will deliver his people through the tribulation and trouble that characterizes life in this present evil age.
- B. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, then God has set his seal upon you, ensuring that you will persevere to the end.
- C. By faith you have washed your garments and made them the purest white in the blood of the Lamb.
- D. And though you presently live as a pilgrim in the wilderness of this world, you have the Lamb as your shepherd as you go through it, and you have God’s promise that one day he will wipe away every tear from your eyes.