

Revelation 7:1-8 – Our Comfort in Calamity

[**read** 7:1, 9] The meaning of that multitude will be the subject of next Sunday’s sermon. But before we turn our attention to the sealing of the 144,000, let’s go back for a minute to remember the Hero of Revelation: [**read** Rev 1:1-3, 19; 4:1; 5:1, 5-6a] In chapter 6, that slain Lamb took the scroll from the hand of God and began to rule the earth by opening six seals that unleashed His will upon the Roman Empire in a series of divine decrees which brought about the decline and fall of the pagan Roman Empire between the years 90 and c.400 AD. [**read** 6:1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 12] The effect of the Lamb’s sovereign overthrow of the pagan Roman Empire is that people were filled with dread of the “wrath of the Lamb” (6:16). But in another dramatic surprise, when John sees the scene change in 7:1, “**after this...**”, instead of seeing God’s wrath poured out as expected, the picture John gives us in chapter 7 is of the Lamb’s salvation being poured out for many. We should no longer call this the chapter about the 144,000, but the chapter about the amazing mercy of God through Jesus Christ.

The symbols

I want to show you something else that is supposed to be surprising, but to do that I think I need to set the stage a bit. And in the literature of the book of Revelation, the main action scenes in this vision happen on a stage, but above the stage there’s a choir loft—the book is written with elements of ancient Greek theatre. Main actions happen on the stage, explanations by the narrator and musical interruptions from the angelic choir, etc., happen in the choir loft—those passages are interludes. That’s what chapter 7 is: an interlude from the choir loft to explain the drama that was about to happen.

Angels were holding back the four winds

You see the end of chapter 6? The people of the Roman Empire who did not know Jesus were alarmed at the sudden overthrow of the pagan religion, and how the Christians who were recently brutally persecuted were now in control of the government—that described much of the Roman Empire in the fourth century. And they fully expected the God of the Christians to punish them: [**read** Rev 6:16b-17]. In order to help John and his readers understand what happens next in chapters 8-16, God shows John four angels holding back the winds from blowing. It’s like the action was paused. [**read** vv1-3] We’re going to see over the next 8 chapters of Revelation that the winds of God’s judgement did resume blowing, and the angels that are pictured here in this interlude as holding back those winds really did “have the power to harm” the people and the lands of the former Roman Empire. One Old Testament source for that symbol of “the four winds” is Dan 7:1-2 [**read**]. It also comes from Jeremiah 49:36-37 [**read**]. So the winds are about how God judges especially those nations who persecuted His people. Maybe you’re wondering, “but wait, what are the ‘earth, sea, and trees’ supposed to symbolize? The great 17th century English commentator, Joseph Mede, explained that earth and sea and trees are simply the sorts of things that get blown around by the wind. What sort of things get harmed when God judges wicked nations? People get harmed. If chapter 7 was not in Revelation, we would go straight to the 7 trumpets of the judgements of the Lamb and we would understandably be dismayed at what we read. Because we would wonder if God was still merciful? We would wonder who could survive the great day of the Wrath of the Lamb? When Christians lose sight of God’s goodness and faithfulness, we start losing hope, our faith grows weak, our good works dry up, and our love grows cold. That’s why chapter 7 exists: to help God’s people hope in God and to fuel our love for God so that we are prepared for the judgements God does pour out on the nations.

The sealed servants of God

The next symbol we need to decipher is the 144,000 “servants of God” (v3) who are “sealed” [read v4]]. The idea of a seal has a good background in the New Testament:

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

"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, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory." (Eph. 1:13-14)

So when calamity falls on nations and even on people who have been sealed by God, what's the worst that could happen to them? To the church in Smyrna, Jesus said “you will not be hurt by the second death” (2:11). To Sardis He promised, [read 3:5].

Verse 4 says that these are “from every tribe of the sons of Israel”. A lot of confusion comes from misreading symbols as if they are literal. The judgements that God pours out in chapters 8-16 are judgements on the lands of the formerly pagan Roman Empire. What are the 12 tribes of Israel doing in the Roman Empire? No, it's a *picture* from the Old Testament—just like God made Israel into a nation, calling Abram from the country of his fathers and making a covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, giving Jacob 12 sons that multiplied into millions, God shows John in Revelation 7 that He was calling a new people out from the pagans of the Roman Empire—a new nation, a Kingdom, the Church of believers in Jesus. Romans were becoming Christians. Doesn't Romans 11 make it clear that Gentile Christians are “grafted in” to a household of faith that began with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, whom God called “Israel”? There are two very serious mistakes people make when interpreting Bible prophecy: the first is to think all the prophecies about Israel are really about the Church; the other is to think the prophecies about Israel are only about Israel. All the way from God's covenant with Abraham, God had promised that through Abraham's offspring, “all the nations of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 22:17). This was what God promised Abram: “I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Gen. 12:3) So both the curse and the blessing would come to include all the nations of the Earth. Which is one reason here in Revelation 7 that the “twelve tribes of Israel” are used as a symbol for both Jews and Gentiles saved through Jesus—i.e., the Church.

This fits what we've seen before, that all the main images in Revelation are symbols, mostly drawn from sources in the Old Testament and used in the vision to show the “servants” of Jesus Christ, “the things that must soon take place” (Rev 1:1)—even the way the vision was “made known” is the Greek word “signified”—to communicate by signs or symbols (Rev 1:1).¹ So these 144,000 sealed “servants of God” (v3) are not the literal tribes of Israel. Instead, this symbol and its details shows troubled Christians a fresh reason to hope in God even through times of persecution, the fall of civilizations, invasions of foreign armies, terrible plagues, and widespread hostility to the Gospel. Isn't that what “servants of God” (v3) are supposed to do? Isn't that our mission? [read Matt 28:19-20] This interlude helps us be faithful when we are frightened and confused about what we see happening around us.

The Empire was (not really) Christian

After Constantine, it looked like Rome had become a Christian empire. But history is very clear that really it only became Christian in name. “For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” (Matt. 7:14) It was, broadly speaking, a change of nominal religions. It

had more to do with politics and power than with a passion for the Gospel. At the end of the 4th century there were millions of people in the whole Roman Empire who professed to be Christians. But here we see only 144,000 sealed. The number should cause us to remember that not all who mark down “Christian” on a census form are really “servants of God”. The number of true believers is always much smaller than the number of nominal Christians. That’s one of the reasons a whole bunch of unbiblical ideas crept into the teachings of the Christian Church up to and during this time. History shows that it was under this so-called Christian Empire that the plain meaning of Scripture got buried under allegorical interpretations, that faith in the Gospel became widely replaced by dependence on rituals like the idea that baptism guaranteed salvation, that it became acceptable to pray to dead Christians called “saints”, that people came to think of priests as super-Christians with special knowledge and special powers.ⁱⁱ But even as time went on, as barbarian invasions dismantled the once mighty Empire of Rome, as Muslim armies came out of nowhere and pounded on the doors of so-called Christian Europe, as the Church bearing the name of Christ sank under dark superstition and corruption, and as the Gospel was eventually almost totally snuffed out, God knew who belonged to Him. Christ did not abandon His Church—he has always been with those who know and preach His Gospel, and He will be with us to the end of this age as He promised. That a big part of the meaning of the 144,000 sealed servants of God. But what about the 12 tribes? What about this list and the details in it? [read vv5-8]

The detailed list of the names of Israel’s sons has to do with who is really a Christian and who is not. For example, Judah is listed first even though he was the fourth son of Jacob. But Jesus was from the tribe of Judah (the “Lion of the Tribe of Judah”!, 5:5). That’s probably why Judah is listed first. But that’s a big clue about the meaning of this list of tribes—that Judah is first. This list does not match any list of the 12 tribes given anywhere in the Old Testament. And even though verse 4 says it includes “every tribe of the sons of Israel”, it leaves out Jacob/Israel’s 5th son, Dan. It includes one of Israel’s grandsons, Joseph’s son Manesseh, but not his other son, Ephraim. It doesn’t match the 12 divisions of the Promised Land because Levi is listed while Dan and Ephraim aren’t. And Gad, Asher, and Naphtali are listed before their older brothers Levi and Simeon, which is strange because Levi and Simeon were from Israel’s wife Leah, but Gad and Asher were from Leah’s servant Zilpah—not a wife but a concubine, and Naphtali was from another concubine, Rachel’s servant Bilhah.

So what? This means that people don’t become true Christians, born-again servants of God and believers in Jesus Christ, on account of their birthright (who is born first: Reuben, Simeon, and Levi were first), or on account of their parentage (who your parents are: e.g., Gad, Asher, and Naphtali, the sons of concubines)—or on account of where they are born (what land you come from: Levi had no land, and Ephraim, missing from this list, ended up with the most land).ⁱⁱⁱ God chooses by His own free and sovereign will whom to save. It is grace and only grace: as Paul says in Romans 9:16, “So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.” And as Matthew Henry said, this list teaches “the election of grace”.^{iv} God doesn’t choose people according to what we deserve. Thank God! He gives grace in spite of what we deserve. The even number from each tribe suggests that God has specific people in mind to save, chosen by grace alone. It’s not random. But only He knows why or when or how.

You see, the “sealing of the servants of God” in Revelation 7 is a scene that echoes a much older vision 700 years earlier in the Book of Ezekiel, chapter 9. That prophet saw in a vision that God was about to destroy the people of Jerusalem because of their extreme wickedness. And an angel cried with a loud voice, [read Eze 9:1] And he saw six angels come forward with “weapons for slaughter”, but one angel

with a writing case. [read vv4-5] After the faithful were sealed, Ezekiel saw the other angels went and struck down the rest of the people of Jerusalem. [read v8] In the centuries that followed the fall of paganism in the Roman Empire, Christians might well have prayed the same, “Oh Lord God, will you destroy everybody in the outpouring of your wrath upon the Roman Empire?”

Between about 450 and 500 AD, over 80% of the people just in the city of Rome itself died or fled:^v it became like a ghost town, a shadow of its former glory. It must have been a terrifying time to be alive, and Christians must have wondered why God was allowing it all to happen. But if their preachers had taught them about Revelation 7, about the pause in judgements while God chose and sealed tens of thousands to receive His grace and inherit eternal life, before continuing to execute divine justice on the Empire that had for centuries killed the servants of Christ, while even the nominal churches neglected the Word of Christ (as we will see again next week), then those *true* believers would have continued to know that God is good, He is faithful, and although He is just, He is also merciful to save. And the message remains the same for us in the midst of any trouble or tragedy: as 2 Peter 3 promises very clearly, God will not let any of the people He has chosen to save perish without first hearing the Gospel and believing in Jesus. “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” (2 Pet. 3:9)

ⁱ Friberg’s Lexicon, #24381

ⁱⁱ Oral Collins, *The Final Prophecy of Jesus*, 167: “...during the first two centuries certain evils had crept into the church including Platonic and Gnostic philosophy, the allegorization of Scripture, sacramentalism (especially baptismal regeneration), veneration of dead saints, and the elevation of priesthood—all to be substantially enhanced in the newly Christianized Empire.”

ⁱⁱⁱ I was helped toward this insight by the comments of Albert Barnes: “Perhaps all that [can be] fairly inferred is, that there would be no partiality or preference for one more than another; that there would be no favouritism on account of the tribe or denomination to which any one belonged; but that the seal would be impressed on all, of any denomination, who had the true spirit of religion. No one would receive the token of the Divine favour [because] he was of the tribe of Judah or Reuben; no one [because] he belonged to any particular denomination of Christians. Large numbers from every branch of the church would be sealed; none would be sealed because he belonged to one form of external organization rather than to another; none would be excluded because he belonged to any one tribe, if he had the spirit and held the sentiments which made it proper to recognise him as a servant of God. These views seem to me to express the true sense of this passage.” Albert Barnes, *Notes on the Whole Bible*, Electronic Edition, 1834, sec. Revelation 7:4.

^{iv} Matthew Henry, “Revelation 7:4-8”, 3a, (Crossway Classic Commentary – Revelation), Olive Tree Edition.

^v A catastrophic decline from 650,000 to 100,000 in 50 years or so.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Rome#Germanic_invasions_and_collapse_of_the_Western_Empire]. Accessed September 8, 2018.