

“Sealed from Every Tribe” (Revelation 7)

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Nobody likes talking about being judged by God. But everyone loves talking about heaven. But the two things are different sides of the same coin. Salvation comes through judgment. In war, when one side wins, another side loses. In the Bible, when there's salvation, there's also judgment. Last week, we talked about judgment. But there's good news. There is salvation, and today we'll see which people are spared condemnation.

Today's sermon is the sequel to last week's sermon. Last week, we talked about judgment. Last week, as we read Revelation 6, we encountered images of Jesus unsealing a scroll. In the imagery of the Apocalypse, the scroll contains God's plan of judgment and salvation. Last week, we saw judgments. We saw that there are lower-case-j judgments throughout this age: wars, lack of peace, famine, and death, all brought about by the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. We saw martyred souls crying out to God, “How long before there is justice, before we are avenged?” And then we saw signs of cosmic distress, the sun turning black, the moon becoming blood red, stars falling to the earth, and the sky vanishing. The day of judgment had come, and all people who had not turned to Jesus were trying to hide. They even said to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?” (Rev. 6:16–17).¹

That question is answered in Revelation 7. I don't think that what we see in Revelation 7 is necessarily chronologically after what happens in chapter 6. As I said last week, the book of Revelation gives us a series of images, perspectives on the same reality. We read of different images that depict this age and its end in different ways. But chapter 7 does answer this question: Who can stand before God in that great day of judgment?

Last week, we considered the horror of judgment. But we also talked about the necessity of judgment. God must punish and remove evil in order to fix the world. And if we were honest, we would see that evil lies within us. If we understood God's blazing moral purity and the destructive power of our sin, we would know that God would have every right to condemn us.

¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

That's bad news, but it's understandable. God is holy and loving. He judges because he cannot tolerate evil.

But there is good news, great news, the very best news. God has made a way for people to be spared judgment. Today, we get to see images of the redeemed.

Without further ado, let's read the first half of Revelation 7. We'll read verses 1–8:

¹ 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. 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." 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,
12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh,
- ⁷ 12,000 from the tribe of Simeon,
12,000 from the tribe of Levi,
12,000 from the tribe of Issachar,
- ⁸ 12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun,
12,000 from the tribe of Joseph,
12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed.

John says he saw this image after he saw the events of chapter 6. That doesn't necessarily mean this image comes after those images in time. That's what makes the book of Revelation a bit harder to understand. It's like a movie that jumps around from the present to the future to the present to the future to the past to the future to the present . . . and so on.

In this image, four angels at the four corners of the earth hold back four winds of judgment. The number four here represents the whole earth. Judgment will come upon the whole world. But one angel says that the final judgment won't come until the servants of God are sealed on their foreheads. The word "servant" could literally be translated as "slave." Slaves were marked as belonging to their master, often through a physical mark like a tattoo, or brand, or even a pierced ear (Exod. 21:5–6). Of course, slavery is known as a bad thing, and in America it certainly was. But the New Testament refers to Christians as servants, or slaves, and this is not

a bad thing. Christians are owned by their Master, Jesus, and there is no greater master than him. But the New Testament also teaches that all of us are owned by someone or something. In Romans 6, Paul says we will either be slaves of sin or slaves of righteousness. We will be owned by our addictions, our sins, the devil, or Jesus. As Bob Dylan once sang, “It may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you’re gonna have to serve somebody.”

So, before judgment is issued, God seals his own. He marks them out as his. These are the ones who will be protected. This imagery, once again, comes from the Old Testament. In the book of Ezekiel, God proclaims that Jerusalem will be judged for its idolatry, for its turning away from God and turning to false gods and sin. In chapter 9, God says, “Bring near the executioners of the city, each with his destroying weapon in his hand” (Ezek. 9:1). Things are about to get serious. But before execution and destruction, a man clothed in linen is told, “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” (Ezek. 9:4). Then God tells the executioners to go through the city and spare no one other than those who have been marked (Ezek. 9:5–6). God’s judgment would pass over those who had been sealed on their foreheads. God did judge Jerusalem; it was destroyed by Babylon in 586 BC.

That is what is happening here. And this idea will resurface later in Revelation, when we read that God’s people are marked on their foreheads (Rev. 14:1; 22:4). But there’s another mark, one that more people are familiar with, the mark of the beast (Rev. 13:17; 14:9). And the point of that is not something like a computer chip or whatever ridiculous interpretations people have come up with. The mark isn’t physical. The point is that you will either be sealed or marked out as God’s, or you will be marked as belonging to Satan. There’s no neutral ground. It may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you’re gonna be marked as somebody’s.

So, John hears about this, and then he hears the number of the sealed. He is told that there are 144,000 sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel. The nation of Israel sprang out of Abraham, the great father of the faithful. Abraham’s grandson, Jacob, had twelve children, and their families became the twelve tribes of Israel. Here, we’re told that 12,000 from twelve tribes were sealed.

What does this mean? Before we arrive at any conclusions, it’s important to observe some details. First, the sealed are referred to as “servants of God” in verse 3. Then, we’re told that the sealed are from every tribe of the sons of Israel. But if you look at this list, you’ll notice

that two tribes are missing. Dan is missing, and so is Ephraim (one of Joseph's two sons). (They're probably missing because they were so associated with idolatry.) But we still have twelve names mentioned. Now, Jacob had twelve sons, including everyone in this list with the exception of Manasseh, who was actually Jacob's grandson (and Joseph's other son) and also Dan. But in the Old Testament, the tribes are regarded in different ways. Levi, the tribe of ministers and priests, is often considered separately, because that tribe was consecrated to God, and Joseph is often replaced in the lists of tribes by his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. So, the list usually excludes Levi and Joseph and includes Ephraim and Manasseh. But this list in Revelation 7 is different from all of the various listings of the tribes in the Old Testament. If you're confused right now, that's okay. The point is that not all the tribes of Israel actually appear here, and the list presented here is different from what we read in the Old Testament. That is a big sign that what we're reading about here isn't literal.

Another sign that what we're reading here isn't literal are the numbers. I have said before that the numbers in the book of Revelation are all symbolic. A thousand is a big round number. Sometimes in the Old Testament armies are numbered in the thousands, and it's clear that those numbers are approximate. Twelve is the number of the twelve tribes of Israel. But twelve is also the number of Jesus' apostles—which isn't an accident. Jesus chose twelve men because he was reconstituting Israel. We're told at the end of Revelation that the new creation, the new heaven and earth, is also a city with twelve gates—one for each tribe of Israel—and twelve foundations—one for each apostle. Twelve times twelve times a thousand equals 144,000.

So, what is happening here? It seems that God's people are being described as armies, hosts coming from every tribe of Israel. That may sound strange to think of God's people as an army, but in Revelation 19, when Jesus is depicted as returning to earth as a rider on a white horse, he is accompanied by "the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure," which seems to be a description of the redeemed. And they are described as Israel. Is this a reference to ethnic or biological Israel? No. In the New Testament, Israel is redefined as God's people, people of faith. In Galatians, Paul says that "if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring" (Gal. 3:29). He calls the church "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16). In Romans, Paul says that "a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit" (Rom. 2:29). He also says that "not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring" (Rom. 9:6-7). In Philipians, Paul says that

Christians “are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (Phil. 3:3). And Paul and Peter use words that were applied to Israel in the Old Testament to apply to Christians: They are a people “for his own possession” (Tit. 2:14; cf. Exod. 19:5) and “a chosen race, a royal, priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession” (1 Pet. 2:9; cf. Exod. 19:5–6). The point is that this is one description of the redeemed, a host of servants of God, sealed from every tribe of Israel. Of course, the earliest Christians were Jewish, but both Jewish and Gentile Christians constitute true Israel.

But that same reality can be depicted as a great number of people from every part of the world. Do you remember Revelation 5, which we looked at two weeks ago? In that chapter, John hears that “the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered” (Rev. 5:5). He hears word about a Lion. But when he looks, he sees “a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain” (Rev. 5:6). That must have produced some cognitive dissonance within John. He heard about a conquering Lion only to see a sacrificial Lamb. Those are two descriptions of Jesus, and both are true. Jesus was sacrificed like a lamb in order to pay for the sins of his people. And in laying down his life, he conquers. Also, he will conquer when he returns to earth, like a roaring lion. The point is that one object can be described in two ways that seem contradictory. But there is no contradiction. The two descriptions complement each other and give us a fuller understanding of that object.

And that is what is happening here. John hears that 144,000 were sealed from every tribe of Israel. When he looks, he sees something a bit different. Let’s read the rest of the chapter, verses 9–17:

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.”

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.”

When John looks, he doesn't see 144,000 people. He sees “a great multitude that no one could number.” And they weren't people just from the tribes of Israel, but they were “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.” They stood before God's throne, dressed in white because they have been made pure and because they are conquerors. They have palm branches in their hands, just as people had palm branches when they welcomed the King of kings into the city of Jerusalem (John 12:13). But palm branches also refer to the festival of tabernacles or booths, a festival that commemorated God's provision for Israel when they wandered in the wilderness after being rescued from slavery in Egypt (Lev. 23:40, 43; Neh. 8:15). God has provided for these people. He has tabernacled among them in Jesus (John 1:14). He has sheltered them from scorching heat as they sojourned through this life. Again, God's people are described in terms used of Israel.

It's so important to know that there is one people of God and that there is one way of salvation. There is a popular end-times theology that is often taught in churches, and it's probably the end-times theology that you've been taught and think is true. This theology is not traditional or historical Christianity. It arose around 1830, when one man, John Nelson Darby, created it. Decades later it was popularized in the Scofield Reference Bible. Darby thought that Israel would inherit the earth and the church would inherit heaven, thus dividing God's people in two.² People who have embraced aspects of his theology no longer believe that, but they do believe some rather fantastic things about end times events.³ I don't want to spend much time in polemical mode while teaching this book of Revelation. I would rather present a positive case for what I believe it means. But I will say, both humbly and firmly, that a lot of end-times teaching

² For more information on Darby and his views, see Clarence B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005).

³ Another helpful resource is Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1993). The book can be read online here: <https://frame-poythress.org/ebooks/understanding-dispensationalists>.

is just wrong. It doesn't pay careful attention to the clues in the text that tell us what the author means. And that's how we should try to understand the Bible, just as we try to understand any text. We try to understand what the author means, and we do so by paying careful attention to the clues in the text. Looking for those clues, as well as knowing a little bit about culture and history, can help us understand the author's intentions.

All of that may sound very academic. But the Bible is God's book. He is the primary and ultimate author. The Bible is a book that enables us to know God. Shouldn't we take time to understand the Bible as God has intended it to mean? That's what I'm trying to do whenever I teach and preach the Bible.

Before I continue to talk about this one people of God, I want to touch on what I believe is another misunderstanding. In verse 13, one of the elders, an angelic being, asks John who these people in white robes are. Maybe this is kind of like a pop quiz, to see if John understands. John says, "Sir, you know." Maybe John doesn't know and wants an answer. Maybe he understands that this group is the same as the 144,000. Then the elder says, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation." Some people think "the great tribulation" is a seven-year period that comes after Jesus secretly "raptures" his people to heaven and before he comes in glory to ring in a thousand-year period of peace. There are many problems with this view. The so-called rapture isn't secret, according to 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. And according to that passage, we don't know what happens after Jesus gathers his people. But the greater point here is that there is no passage in the Bible that teaches there is a seven-year "great tribulation." In fact, it seems that this "great tribulation" is a reference to the whole period between Jesus' first and second comings.

In the New Testament, we're told that this is a period of tribulation. Jesus said to his disciples, "In the world you will have tribulation" (John 16:33). Jesus told them they would be delivered "up to tribulation and put you to death" (Matt. 24:9). Paul told Christians "that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). In Romans, Paul says that tribulation will not "separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:35–39). In the book of Revelation, this period has already been described as a period of tribulation (Rev. 1:9; 2:9–10, 32). And if I'm right about Revelation 6, the four horsemen bring tribulation throughout this age. Things may get worse before Jesus returns. But this age is one of both tribulation and blessing, and God's people are those who are rescued from the great tribulation

not because they don't suffer or even die, but because "They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." Jesus' blood, his life, was sacrificed so that they could live. Jesus' sacrifice takes away their sins. Jesus' death makes them clean, acceptable to God.

The main point here is that there is one people of God, and they come from all over the world, not just from every nation, but from every ethnicity and every language. Today, we would say they come from every people group. This is one reason why Christianity is a rebuke to racism. The main reason is that all people are made in God's image, and all people descend from an original human couple. What were Adam and Eve? Were they Jews or Gentiles? Neither. They were just people. Were they black or white? Who knows, and who cares? They were just human beings made to reflect God's glory, to rule the world, to serve God, to love him, to obey him. The fact is that there is only one human race. So, we should not hate others made in God's image. We shouldn't judge people based on superficial characteristics that they can't control, like skin color. That's as foolish as judging people based on height or eye color. And we shouldn't act as though skin color is what defines a person. In the end, there are two identifies: you will belong to the devil or the Lord. The key identifying mark is not skin color, or gender, or nation, or political party. The key identifying mark isn't one that you can see. The true, eternal identity that we have is whether we're marked out as God's or the beast's. People from all different backgrounds will try to hide from God's wrath (Rev. 6:15). People from all different backgrounds will be one in Christ (Gal. 3:28). The difference is whether people receive the gift of salvation.

And there is one way of salvation. The redeemed cry out, in verse 10, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" Salvation is something God provides. It is a gift given by God to be received by faith. Salvation means being spared condemnation for sin. The Bible is clear: All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). We have all failed to love God and obey him. If we were to think back on all the times we have failed to do what is right, if we were to search our thoughts and desires and consider all the times we have thought and wanted perverse things, we should know that we are guilty. God would be just to condemn us all to hell. But God the Father gave us his precious Son, who came willingly to earth to become a human being, to live the life that we don't live, a perfect life of love and obedience, and to die the death that we deserve. Notice that these people don't say, "We saved ourselves!" They don't say, "We perfected ourselves! We pulled ourselves up by the bootstraps! We made

the right decisions!” They don’t say that they went to the right church or had all the right political views. No, they give God all the credit.

Though this passage doesn’t explicitly say as much, these people simply have faith. They trusted that God would provide a way to be saved. They trusted that God would make things right. They knew that they couldn’t fix themselves or the world. Specifically, what we believe about Jesus reveals whether we really trust in God. But faith isn’t just knowledge. Faith means being willing to serve God. Faith means trusting in Jesus through tribulation and persecution, through trials and struggles.

God has never told us that this life will be easy. In fact, it’s quite the opposite. He has promised us trials. The trials won’t end until we die or Jesus returns. This is all by God’s design. God cannot end the trials until he removes all evil in the world, and when he removes all evil from the world, it will be game over. Life will not be the same. There will be no more time to turn to Jesus. There will be no more people conceived and born. God is giving us more time to turn to him, more time to make more disciples, more time to participate in his mission. But with the mission come trials.

But God doesn’t just promise trials. He promises us great and beautiful things. Look at verse 15: God will shelter these people with his presence. They will no longer hunger and thirst. They will no longer be exposed to the sun without relief. In a world before modern technology, being exposed to the harsh sun was a real threat. So was being hungry and thirsty. But in this life, even with the best technology, we still hunger and thirst for more, and we are still exposed to danger. God promises to feed us with good and give us drink that satisfies. He promises to shelter us from danger.

God also promises to lead us and to give us living water. Jesus said in John’s Gospel that he is the good shepherd (John 10:11). He leads his people to good pastures and provides for them in the midst of danger. Most of us know Psalm 23. We just sang a paraphrase of that Psalm. Jesus, the King of Love, will lead his people beside still and living waters. In John’s Gospel, Jesus told a woman not continually to drink from water from wells that can’t satisfy (John 4:7–15). He said, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:13–14). He called this “living water” (John 4:10). Later in John’s Gospel, we’re told that this living water is the Holy Spirit (John

7:37–39). Jesus says that all who come to him can have God himself inside of them, and nothing short of God will satisfy our desires.

And God will comfort us. He “will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” He will remove all sadness from us. If you look at these verses in a study Bible, you may notice that they are basically quotations of Old Testament passages that make great promises. Isaiah 49:8–10 says:

- 8 Thus says the Lord:
“In a time of favor I have answered you;
in a day of salvation I have helped you;
I will keep you and give you
as a covenant to the people,
to establish the land,
to apportion the desolate heritages,
9 saying to the prisoners, ‘Come out,’
to those who are in darkness, ‘Appear.’
They shall feed along the ways;
on all bare heights shall be their pasture;
10 they shall not hunger or thirst,
neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them,
for he who has pity on them will lead them,
and by springs of water will guide them.

And Isaiah 25:6–9 says:

- 6 On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,
of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.
7 And he will swallow up on this mountain
the covering that is cast over all peoples,
the veil that is spread over all nations.
8 He will swallow up death forever;
and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces,
and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the LORD has spoken.
9 It will be said on that day,
“Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us.
This is the LORD; we have waited for him;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

Did you hear that? God doesn’t just promise to wipe away tears. He promises to give us the best food and wine. But more importantly, God will swallow up death. Death will die. And on that day, all the redeemed will rejoice in God. They will have waited for his salvation, even

through tribulation, and they will find rest and relief and ultimate salvation when Jesus comes again.

I urge you to trust in Jesus. There is one people of God and one way of salvation. That way is trusting in the one who said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Trust in Jesus. He will satisfy your soul—perhaps you won’t feel that now, but you will in the end. He will wipe away your tears and crush death. If you trust in Jesus, you will truly live, now and forevermore.

If you trust in Jesus, keep trusting. Don’t get discouraged in times of struggle. Don’t give up during tribulation. Look beyond those things to your Shepherd who will supply your needs. He has promised us a beautiful pasture. Follow him.