

Series Revelation

This Message #13 Revelation 7:1-17

John saw visions in sequence, one after the other, but it is obvious from our organization of the book into “scans” or “sweeps” of history that many events happen simultaneously. For example, each of the first two “scans” cover the years between Pentecost and the end of the age, but the material is focused on different objectives and emphasize different purposes. The content in the book of Revelation is not chronological or linear. Rather, it is cyclical, or, as some commentators describe it, the book has lots of “recapitulation.”

Furthermore, within each “scan” there can be simultaneous events viewed from different perspectives. For example, the four horsemen we thought about last week were introduced to John one after the other, but history indicates that their activities are concurrent. Conquest, warfare, famine, and plague have been continuous occurrences throughout human history.

Also, John saw concurrent events on earth and in heaven, and events which affected believers as well as non-believers. The 5th seal described a heavenly scene in which John saw “the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.” The 6th seal described phenomena on earth — an earthquake, changes in the sun and moon, falling stars, disappearing sky, and the terror of earth dwellers who pleaded for the mountains to fall on them so they would not have to face the One who was seated on the throne and the wrath of the Lamb.

Chapter 6 ended with an important question: “the great day of wrath has come, and who can stand?” Chapter 7 answers that question. The short answer is, only those who have the seal of the living God. The people of chapter 7 are contrasted with the fearful people who wanted to die. Today we are going to read and think about two groups of believers, one of them on earth and the other in heaven. The two groups seem to be different, but there are good reasons to think that John is seeing the same people viewed from different locations and different times.

Read Chapter 7:1-17

Six of the seven seals were opened in chapter 6. After their opening, devastating and frightening conditions occurred on earth. We must remember that the seals are only preparatory for the judgments to follow. The judgments of God will not begin until after the 7th and last seal is opened.

The text informs us that there is an interruption in the narrative before the opening of the seventh seal. There are several of these interruptions in the book. As far as we can understand, John saw the visions in the sequence in which he wrote. The visions and John's report of them seem a little disjointed and confusing to most readers, but, in actuality, they are presented in a way to be most meaningful and helpful to all believers, whether they were alive at the end of the 1st Century or are living in this, the 21st Century. We need to keep in mind that the book of Revelation is for all believers of the Church age.

In his vision John saw four angels positioned at the four corners of the earth prepared to take part in the judgment as soon as the 7th seal was opened. Another angel told them to "stand down" until "the seal of the living God" could be placed "on the foreheads of the servants of God." In chapter 5 we read that the Lamb had "purchased people for God" with his shed blood, thereby claiming ownership for the Father. A servant with a mark of ownership could not be made the property of someone else. In a later chapter in this book (13:16), we will read that Satan will cause his mark of ownership to be placed on all non-believers, and there will be several references about the distinctions between individuals who have the mark of God and those who have the mark of Satan.

The seal also represents protection. The description of the judgments that God will inflict on evil doers begins in chapter 8, and, in anticipation of those judgments, God is separating out His servants and declaring that they will not have to suffer in the same way as evil doers.

The situation will be similar to the circumstances of the Hebrews in Egypt in the time of Moses. When God poured out His judgments against the Egyptians, in the form of 10 plagues, none of the Israelites were adversely affected. No swarms of flies bothered them. Not one of their animals died. When darkness enveloped the land of Egypt for three days, "all the Israelites had light in the places where they lived" (*Exodus 8:22-23; 9:4, 26; 10:23; 11:7*). And when God announced that the firstborn of every living creature would die, God promised that "no destructive plague would touch them" if they smeared blood on the entrance ways of their homes (*Exodus 12:12-13*). God protected His people in the midst of great turmoil.

An even better illustration is in Ezekiel chapter 9. Ezekiel heard God call out in a loud voice, “Bring the guards (actually guardian angels) of the city here, each with a weapon in his hand.” Ezekiel then saw “six men coming from the direction of the upper gate, each with a deadly weapon in his hand. With them was a man clothed in linen who had a writing kit at his side. ... Then the LORD called to the man clothed in linen who had the writing kit at his side and said to him, ‘Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it.’ ... Then he said to the others, ‘Follow him through the city and kill, without showing pity or compassion. Slaughter old men, young men and maidens, women and children, but do not touch anyone who has the mark’” (*Ezekiel 9:1-6*). Again, this is an example of God protecting His faithful followers.

The seal put upon the forehead of God’s servants is different than the spiritual seal which is placed on believers by the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul wrote, “Having believed, you were marked in him (Christ) with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession” (*Ephesians 1:13-14*). Paul expressed a similar thought in another letter: God “anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (*II Corinthians 1:22*). All believers, when they come to faith, are sealed with the indwelling Holy Spirit as assurance that they are members of God’s family.

The primary purpose for the sealing in chapter 7 was to provide special protection for those believers who would be entering the period of judgment. The sealing of the 144,000 was not the result of their conversion. They are already identified as the “servants of God.” The mark was for their protection.

This raises an important question, and it relates to the statement made by God to the souls of the martyrs in chapter 6. They were told to “wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants ... who were to be killed as they had been, was complete” (*Revelation 6:9-11*). Scripture makes it clear that the followers of Jesus will have to deal with persecution and death right up to the instant of His visible return. So here’s the question: How can the people of God be, at one and the same time, protected by Him and subjected to persecution and even killed?

The answer is that believers will be protected from the judgment wrath of God but not protected from the wrath of Satan and his helpers. After the 7th seal is opened, the wrath of God will be poured out on earth and on evildoers. The “servants of God” will be protected from God’s judgments, but they will continue to experience abuses by evildoers until that time. In fact, the persecutions against believers will escalate at the end of the age as Satan makes a determined effort to eliminate all the people of God.

Believers have no reason to fear either the terrible natural phenomena which were mentioned at the end of chapter 6 or the judgments which are described in later chapters of this book. The words of Jesus apply: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (*Matthew 10:28*). The Apostle Paul wrote that believers “are not appointed for wrath but for salvation” (*I Thessalonians 5:9*). The plea throughout this book is for faithful perseverance in the midst of the opposition of this world, of being “overcomers unto death” if necessary.

The big question in this chapter is the identity of the 144,000 servants who were to be sealed. John did not actually see this group; he only heard the number and the listing of the tribes. There are four main opinions about the identification of the 144,000, and not a few variations within these main opinions. Some commentators take the number and the list of tribal names to be a literal reference to the nation of Israel, declaring that the 144,000 are direct descendants of the patriarch Jacob. Some state that the 144,000 are born-again Jews and followers of Messiah Jesus, and others state that it is a special group of unbelieving Jews who will become believers during the time of judgment. Some commentators think that the number is symbolic and represents the church — represents all the believers who are alive at the beginning of the judgment period.

Let me explain some of the reasons given for these various opinions. Some commentators base their conclusions on the writings of Paul in the letter to the Roman church. Paul devoted three chapters to a discussion about all the Israelites who were guilty of unbelief. Using the metaphor of an olive tree, Paul explained that Jews who did not believe the promises of God were like branches which had been broken off, and in their place branches representing the Gentiles had been grafted in. According to Paul, “Israel has experienced a hardening in part” during this church age “until the full number of the Gentiles has come in,” at which point God will once again focus His attention on the Jews, “And so all Israel will be saved” (*Romans 11:25-26*).

According to this school of thought, the 144,000 are unbelieving Jews who will receive special attention from God at the end of the age and who will receive Jesus as their Messiah.

Other respected theologians base their interpretation of the 144,000 on a different set of writings of the Apostle Paul. In his letter to the Galatian Church, Paul informed the Gentile believers, "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed" and heirs to the promises given to Abraham (*Galatian 3:29*). In another verse he said, "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation," and he refers to the church as the "Israel of God" (*Galatian 6:16*).

In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote, "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly, and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code," the law (*Romans 2:28-29*). In the letter to the Philippians, Paul stated, "It is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus" (*Philippians 3: 3*).

This second group of commentators emphasizes the distinction that Paul makes between the true, spiritual Jew and the physical descendants of Abraham. Only those Jews who recognize Jesus as Messiah can rightly be called "Israel" in the New Testament sense.

The majority of contemporary commentators are inclined to treat the number 144,000 as symbolic, representing believers of all ethnic backgrounds. Their reasons are numerous. There is the historical fact that ten of the twelve tribes disappeared in the Assyrian exile and the records of the other two tribes were lost in the Babylonian exile and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Modern Jews have no knowledge of their tribal ancestry.

Another reason is that the list of tribes given in verses 5 through 8 is not the same as any lists in the Old Testament. The list in the reading only names eleven sons of Jacob and includes one grandson. The names of two tribes are missing.

Another convincing argument for the symbolism of the 144,000 relates to the use of the number “12.” The precise use of “12” and multiples of “12” is used several times in this book to indicate “completeness” and “perfection.” For examples, at the end of this book, the dimensions of the Holy City are 12,000 stadia in length, width, and height. The wall around the city is 144 cubits tall. It will have 12 gates and twelve foundations. The tree of life in the city will bear 12 crops of fruit. There are 24 Elders around the throne.

There is general agreement among commentators in only two areas. Everyone agrees that the sealing is a sovereign action of God, and that the 144,000 represents people of God who will be protected from His wrath.

John heard the angel describe 12 tribes with each tribe having 12,000 members. It seems to me that the list of the tribes and the total number of individuals announced by the angel stresses the completeness and thoroughness of God in getting His people ready for the judgments at the end of the age. Believers will be sealed and shielded from the outpouring of wrath against the evildoers. The number 144,000 represents the number of believers who will carry their witness into the judgment period. Let’s keep in mind that the central focus throughout this book is the church, and that the main emphasis throughout the book is on one particular group — faithful overcomers.

The first 8 verses of chapter 7 give us a glimpse of the time just prior to God’s outpouring of judgment, and verses 9 through 17 take us forward to the time following the judgments. In the second part of the chapter John saw a “great multitude that no one could count.” I think it is interesting how John’s perspective and the perspective of heaven are sometimes different. Previously, when John was told about “the Lion of Judah,” he turned and actually saw a Lamb. When John heard the angel talk about 144,000 from the tribes of Israel, what he actually saw was a great multitude “from every nation, tribe, people, and language.” This multitude was in their resurrection glory “standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.”

In verse 14 John learned that the members of this multitude “had come out of the great tribulation.” Jesus described this tribulation period as a time of unprecedented persecution: “For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now, and never to be equaled again” (*Matthew 24:21*). There has been persecution of the Church for 2000 years, but this future tribulation period will be distinguished from previous persecutions by its intensity.

There is no specific statement that any of the members of the multitude were martyrs, but many of them undoubtedly were because the tribulation will be a time of killing, a time when Satan and his helpers will try to wipe out the people of God. Countering Satan's efforts are the promises of God to Abraham concerned the number of his descendants. God said that He would "make his descendants as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore" (*Genesis 22:17*). That's the kind of multitude seen by John.

The individuals around the throne were too many to count. However, God knew the exact number. He had anticipated the birth of each one and called each one by name to Himself. There is a theological term to describe God's call: election. God had a plan for each member of the multitude. He had guided them to faith and placed them in strategic locations among the people groups of earth to be representatives of His kingdom. From the early part of this chapter we understand that He knew exactly which of those servants to mark for protection from His wrath. He knew the exact number of those who would be killed for their faith and added to the "souls of those who were under the altar."

God's "salvation" of specific individuals was a part of His plan from eternity, and it included the individual's initial coming to faith and to his or her deliverance out of tribulation. This is why the believers "cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'" This is why all the angelic creatures in heaven responded with their "Amen," and then they acknowledged the way God carried out His eternal plan: "praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God forever and ever." The angels were joyful that the redemption of mankind, the ultimate purpose of God for creation, had been realized.

The Elders then made a statement about the blessings the multitude would enjoy. The Father will "spread His tent over them" which means that He will shelter them in His presence. The phrase implies a permanent residence. There would be no more "hunger" or "thirst," no more "any scorching heat." They would be guided by Jesus, the Lamb, who would "lead them to springs of living water." And lastly, "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." Not only will God's people never again experience pain or sadness, but the implication is that all the experiences of the past will be forgotten.

Such is the privilege of those who "have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."