

Revelation

Part Twenty
The Seal of the Living God
(Revelation 7:1-3)

With Study Questions

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A Running Start at Chapter Seven

Surveying our congregation, and others who have been following this series, I have found a broad spectrum of responses to this series on Revelation. Some are razor focused. These have conveyed to me an encouragement they have never before known in their study of this book. As a pastor, this is reassuring. Others are confused. They can't seem to put all the pieces in their proper places. As a pastor, this is challenging. Then there are those who are sleeping deeper than I have ever seen a congregant slumber. As a pastor, this is humbling.

To be sure, Revelation is a difficult book. At the risk of sounding harsh, I think, in part, it is difficult due to the current, popular theological carnival surrounding its message. We interject intervals of thousands of years without exegetical or biblical warrant. As already indicated, we read passages with influence from newspapers over influence from the Old Testament. And because of the symbolic language throughout the book, we impose, what I have found to be, strained conjecture regarding who's who and what's what.

The chapter under our current meditation is a prime example of this. Who are these 144,000? Are they Jehovah's Witnesses? Are they Mormon elders? Are they 144,000 Jewish Billy Graham's preaching during the post rapture Seven-Year-Tribulation? The guesses go on.

In these messages I find myself pursuing three goals: First, to make things as simple as possible (1 Corinthians 14:9, 15, 16). Second, to make things as Biblical as possible (2 Timothy 2:15). These first two should fold into the third goal, which is to make things as ministerial as possible (1 Peter 5:2).

Years ago, I did a sermon series entitled *Remedial Christianity*. In part, that series chronicled the many things I needed to unlearn before I could learn properly. There is not a book in the Bible or a topic in all of theology that falls more into this category of remedial. Like a military flight

instructor telling all of his fledgling pilots (who have civilian flight experience) to forget everything they've learned. Let's see if we can clear our minds of the theological circus, which so often accompanies Revelation, and get *a running start* at chapter seven with a brief review of the first six chapters.

Two times in the first three verses of chapter one, John tells us that he is writing of things which are about to happen.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants – things which must shortly take place...Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near (Revelation 1:1, 3).

If we can allow the Scriptures to keep us where they want to keep us, a huge part of the confusion will be alleviated.

After a glorious greeting, we (really, the seven churches of chapters two and three) are given a vision of the glorified Christ who is in their midst (Revelation 1:13). These seven churches, truly all Christian churches, should ever be cognizant of who is in their midst, especially as we encounter difficulty and temptation.

After this (which would be considered "**the things which are**" in the outline of Revelation) we see the seven letters to seven churches in chapters two and three. The theme of these letters is (generally speaking) to repent, to persevere and overcome. They are ever reminded, by way of opening description, of the glorified Christ in this call to stay the course.

There is also, in these two chapters, reminders of the nearness of the events foretold in Revelation. Smyrna is told not to...

...fear any of those things which you are about to suffer (Revelation 2:10).

Recognizing that this is not a reference to the Second Coming (which will someday happen), Thyatira is told to...

...hold fast what you have till I come (Revelation 2:25).

Similarly in His letter to Sardis, He writes...

Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you (Revelation 3:3).

Speaking of a soon coming “**hour of trial**” (which I would take to be referencing the destruction of the temple and the fall of Jerusalem), Jesus warns Philadelphia...

Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown (Revelation 3:11).

Then the final promise to the Laodiceans:

To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne (Revelation 3:21).

We then move to “**the things which take place after this**” (Revelation 1:19) in chapter four. With no indication of any lengthy interval of time, and directly after the promise of sitting with Christ on His *throne*, we are given the vision of John, and only John, in the *throne-room* of God (Revelation 4:2), as if to get a firsthand look at the throne of promise.

In chapter one the churches are given a vision of the glorified Christ in the midst of the churches. Now we are given a vision of the glory of God with the heavenly host (elders, the Spirit, cherubim/seraphim). God in heaven being worshiped as Creator (Revelation 1:11).

Yet a vision of the Creator is not necessarily good news (Isaiah 6:5) for these churches (or any churches or people). The good news is brought to the fore in chapter five, where we are also introduced to a scroll which pertains to the judicial and redemptive events that will soon take place. It is a scroll that Christ, and Christ alone is worthy to open. The worship moves from creation to redemption.

And they sang a new song, saying: “You are worthy to take the scroll, And to open its seals; For You were slain, And have redeemed us to God by Your blood Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation (Revelation 5:9).

As the scroll is opened in chapter six, we begin to see, with the opening of each seal of the scroll, a preview of that which will unfold in the chapters ahead. I must repeat, in the text you see no great interval of time. The original readers are bracing themselves for soon-to-be cataclysmic activity presented in the breaking of these seals. We read of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (conquering, death, economic difficulty, famine and pestilence).

In the breaking of the fifth seal, we read of something that will help us understand chapter seven. Martyred souls praying for God's justice against evil (Revelation 6:9, 10). Again, we see a timeframe which must not be ignored if we wish to understand this book. These martyred saints are told...

...that they should rest a little while longer, until both *the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed (Revelation 6:11).*

You may wish to reread all of Revelation up to this point. You will notice, as I have indicated, no mention of any lengthy period of time leading up to this prayer. And these martyrs are told that the persecution of their brethren will continue "**a little while longer**" which makes it difficult to interpret this as the ongoing persecution of Christians throughout the entire New Covenant, as some amillennialists understand this.

In the breaking of the sixth seal, we see language that many people associate with the end of the world. But as we discussed in detail last time, if we look at the Old Testament, we conclude that this language is used by God to describe His judgment of nations by other nations. This is describing the cataclysmic end of the Old Covenant.

In that He says, "*A new covenant,*" He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away (Hebrews 8:13).

As I said in a previous sermon, the Kingdom of God is established, but in a bad neighborhood (the bad neighborhood being whole world, but primarily Jerusalem and Rome). In His preservation of His church, He is

contending with the neighborhood. But here is the question leading into chapter seven: in this explosion which initiates the end of the Old Covenant and the establishing of the New, how will Christ protect His bride? Some severe things are about to happen. Will the faithful be victims of some type of friendly fire? When the temple is destroyed, will the stones collaterally fall upon believers as well as the persecutors of the church?

After these things I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, on the sea, or on any tree. ² Then I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God. And he cried with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, ³ saying, "Do not harm the earth, the sea, or the trees till we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads." (Revelation 7:1-3).

Whether this is an interlude, or a continuation of the sixth seal is not of great importance. There has been a cry by the slain for justice and that justice is coming soon (Revelation 6:10, 11). It is as if these four angels are holding back the floodgates of judgment, which "**winds**" represent (Jeremiah 49:36; Daniel 11:4; Zechariah 6:5) that would soon besiege Jerusalem (God using the armies of Rome-Luke 21:20).

It has been suggested, with merit, that chapter seven answers the final question in chapter six, which is "**who is able to stand**" (Revelation 6:17)? It appears to follow in the sense of the passage that these angels are holding back judgment along the lines of the timeframe given in response to the prayers of the martyred saints, "**it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer**" (Revelation 6:11).

Two things would happen during this period while they were to be at rest. First, the martyring of their brethren would continue for a time (Revelation 6:11). As we learned earlier, the environment of the first century was not a safe one for the faithful. This persecution was already happening. But something bigger was soon coming!

God would vindicate His own. As suggested in an earlier metaphor, the bad neighborhood would soon be dealt with that the Kingdom of God might grow (BC to AD. Old Covenant to New Covenant). This is described by the apocalyptic language (sun darkened, moon to blood, stars falling) at the end of chapter six as well as all three records of the Olivet Discourse in

Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21. This is all being held at bay while something else takes place.

“Another angel ascending from the east.” Let us not lose the beauty conveyed! Without pushing the identity of this fifth angel too far, he certainly appears (based upon what he will do) to be an agent of Christ, an agent of deliverance coming with the sunrise.

Through the tender mercy of our God, with which the Dayspring (sunrise-ESV) from on high has visited us (Luke 1:78).

But to you who fear My name The Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings (Malachi 4:2).

We see throughout Scripture emblems or implements or sacraments of deliverance, whether an ark (Genesis 6) or blood on the doorposts (Exodus 12). Here we read of an angel telling the other angels not to exact their judgments until he accomplishes a task of sealing the servants of God **“on their foreheads.”** Like so much of Revelation, this task is not without parallel in the Old Testament.

In the ninth chapter of Ezekiel, we read of God destroying Jerusalem through the Babylonians (586 BC). But prior to that judgment, that fall of Jerusalem, the people of God would be marked on their foreheads, indicating that they belonged to God and would escape that judgment. The parallel is unmistakable.

And, similar to the way many Christians feel regarding the state of affairs of the church and their land, these Old Testament saints are identified as those...

...who sigh and cry over all the abominations that are done within it (Ezekiel 9:4).

We read of similar language regarding Lot, as one to be delivered as well, that he was...

...greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked
⁸ (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day,

he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard) (2 Peter 2:7, 8).

Jesus had the same reaction to Jerusalem when He **“wept over”** Jerusalem in light of their impending judgment (Luke 19:41-44). The question that must be asked here is, ‘What of the bride of Christ? Will they be judged along with those who crucified the Lord of glory?’ In all of His talk on this tribulation that was to fall upon Jerusalem, did Jesus warn His own followers? Yes!

In all three of the gospels which contain the Olivet Discourse, those listening to the warning from Christ are told,

Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains (Matthew 24:16; Mark 13:14; Luke 20:21).

What ought to be obvious here is that if this is a prophecy of the Second Coming and worldwide catastrophe, how are you and I, here in Los Angeles, going to flee to the mountains of Judea? Yet the fourth century historian, Eusebius wrote,

The whole body, however, of the church at Jerusalem, having been commanded by a divine revelation, given to men of approved piety there before the war, removed from the city, and dwelt at a certain town beyond the Jordan, called Pella.¹

J. Marcellus Kik, remarkably points out,

It has been estimated that over a million Jews lost their lives in that terrible siege, but not one of them was a Christian.²

Of course, these are extrabiblical historical accounts of these events. But what is not extrabiblical is the warning of Christ to flee Judea and the angel of deliverance holding the judgment at bay while those who belong

¹ Gregg, *Revelation Four Views*, p. 130.

² Chilton, *Days of Vengeance*, p. 202

to God are sealed on their foreheads (foreheads becoming its own topic for another time).

Again, over and against these prophecies forcing us to conclude that there will be a downward trajectory in human history, we see just the opposite. We read here yet another example of God preserving His church. He seals those who belong to Him.

A seal is a mark of ownership. The sacraments are signs and seals (Romans 4:11). Those who are sealed, pointing more deeply to the sealing of the Spirit (Ephesians 1:13, 14) are preserved and protected. And even though the protection in the context of seventh chapter of Revelation involved protection from the Romans armies, let us not think it ends there or is even primarily there.

The chapter moves into the heavenly perspective where we will see that the protection and preservation extends to that which is eternal, where the afflictions and consequences of the find their ways into our lives. As we see so often in Revelation, we are swept into that which is infinitely glorious, where **“God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Revelation 7:17)**. But we will address that in the weeks to come.

Questions for Study

1. How do you find yourself responding to lessons on Revelation? Is it clear, confusing, ministerial? Why do you think you respond the way you do (pages 2, 3)?
2. Does Revelation tell us when the events it contains will take place? Explain (pages 3, 4)?
3. Why do you suppose chapter one reveals the glorified Christ (page 3)?
4. Is chapter four far in the future from chapter three? Why or why not (page 4)?
5. Why is chapter four not necessarily good news apart from chapter five (pages 4, 5)?
6. What do the seals represent? When do these things happen (pages 4, 5)?
7. In what respect is the Kingdom of God preserved in a “bad neighborhood” (pages 5, 6)?
8. What is the fifth angel keeping the other four angels from doing? What is this event in history (pages 6, 7)?
9. What does it mean to be sealed of God? Is this true of you? How so (pages 8, 9)?