

Revelation

*Part Twenty-One
Sheltered With His Presence
(Revelation 7:4-17)*

With Study Questions

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12/5/2021*

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And I heard the number of those who were sealed. One hundred *and* forty-four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel *were* sealed: ⁵ of the tribe of Judah twelve thousand *were* sealed; of the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand *were* sealed; of the tribe of Gad twelve thousand *were* sealed; ⁶ of the tribe of Asher twelve thousand *were* sealed; of the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand *were* sealed; of the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand *were* sealed; ⁷ of the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand *were* sealed; of the tribe of Levi twelve thousand *were* sealed; of the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand *were* sealed; ⁸ of the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand *were* sealed; of the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand *were* sealed; of the tribe of Benjamin twelve thousand *were* sealed. ⁹ After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation *belongs* to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" ¹¹ All the angels stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, and fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying: "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom, Thanksgiving and honor and power and might, *Be* to our God forever and ever. Amen." ¹³ Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?" ¹⁴ And I said to him, "Sir, you know." So he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and 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 dwell among them. ¹⁶ They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; ¹⁷ for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 7:4-17).

Introduction

One of the great conundrums plaguing the human psyche in our contemplations of an all-good and almighty God is human suffering; especially when it happens en masse. Whether it's the tens of millions under the brutal totalitarianism of a Stalin, Hitler or Mao or the seemingly thoughtless, ruthless acts of nature, like floods, earthquakes and hurricanes which indiscriminately take the lives of young and old, male and female.

Death is never easy. But to come to the realization, at the end of one's life, that we barely ascend to the rank of a statistic, is conspicuously heartbreaking. What impact have we had? At what level have we mattered? To die with such insignificance, means we must have lived with similar insignificance. It is with little wonder, given these things, that many of the greatest thinkers, writers, poets, statesmen, find themselves surrounded by, and indwelt with, self-destructive meaninglessness.

Why introduce this section of Revelation with such a morose, gloomy approach? Because this is the context of our chapter. These seven churches are being made aware of an apocalypse. In an explosive and judgmental conclusion to the Old Covenant, Four Horsemen (conquering, death, economic scarcity, pestilence) would soon be upon them. As the seals of judgment are opened by Christ, it would seem as if the world was being decreed.

We must be careful, in all the sensationalism surrounded Revelation, not to lose the immediate, loving, caring, ministerial message. The floodgates are about to open. The rhetorical, "**who is able to stand?**" question, at the end of the previous chapter, hovers. In chapter seven we are introduced to four angels holding back the winds of judgment. Then, as if a sunrise, a fifth angel ascends from the east, crying with a "**loud voice,**" as if to quiet an otherwise raucous environment.

He tells the other angels to do no harm until something very personal takes place. The "**servants of God,**" those who belong to Christ are to be sealed. As we discussed last time, to be sealed is a sign of ownership, protection, belonging, identity. We might think of a wedding ring, or more biblically, the sacraments or the sealing of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13).

In the massive cataclysm, which is about to take place, there is an intimacy that Christ desires His church, His bride, would know. They belong to Him. And He will care for them on earth and in heaven.

I couldn't help thinking of the petulant little Rose in Saint-Exupery's

Little Prince. How, in an effort at significance, she sought to convince the Little Prince that she was the only rose in the universe. That she was unique and special and how he should feel privileged to even know her. Then, as he travels, he comes to realize that there are millions of roses. That she had lied. She was not unique, nor particularly special. But later, through the wisdom of a fox, he came to realize she was indeed special because she was his rose. He had tamed her. He loved her. It would not be a matter of deceit on his part to finally agree with her that she was indeed exclusive.

The horrifying destruction revolving around the razing of the temple would have no significant effect upon those who followed the counsel of Christ. He had given explicit instructions on how to escape the Tribulation (Matthew 24:15-25; Mark 13:14-23; Luke 21:20-24), and they heeded those instructions while the angels held back the winds of judgment. But now we must wrestle through one of the more curious designations in Revelation. The recipients of this seal of intimacy are the 144,000. Who are they?

144,000

The speculations revolving around who these 144,000 sealed saints are range from likely to reasonable to far-fetched. Some say they are Mormon High Priests, or Jehovah's Witnesses. Others offer that they are post-rapture Jewish evangelists, who can be likened to 144,000 Jewish Billy Grahams during the Tribulation or Christ's Commandos.

Time doesn't allow a full treatment of all these views. What we wish to avoid is taking a very difficult, prophetic passage of Scripture and allow it to reframe our basic (and clearer) understanding of how God operates in redemptive history. There is nothing in this passage suggesting Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses or post-rapture super-saints.

We should also avoid seeking to overturn the laborious efforts within the New Testament/Covenant to establish the unity between the Jewish Christian and the gentile Christian. Regarding the natural alienation from the "**commonwealth**" (*politeias*, from where we get the word politics) of Israel, the covenants of Israel and everything else that would naturally divide the church, Paul calls us to view the Jewish Christians and gentile Christians (in other words, all Christian) as "**one new man**" (**Ephesians 2:15**).

Keep in mind, that the apostasy of Israel had declined to the point where Jesus, twice, indicates that the Jew of His day was not a true Jew at all

(Revelation 2:9; 3:9). All that to say it would require a serious departure from the rest of the New Testament to view these 144,000 saints as entirely Jewish.

The natural question is, why then does he list the Twelve Tribes? One, not so obvious answer is, he doesn't. It is of great significance that the tribes are never listed this way in all of Scripture. Reuben is always listed first, as the firstborn. But here Judah (the fourth born) is listed first. Why? Because he is the tribe of Christ. Dan is missing altogether, due to their special problem with idolatry (Dan shall be a serpent. Genesis 49:17), and the same with Ephraim, who is replaced by Joseph.

Also, James refers to Christians, in general, as **"twelve tribes"** (James 1:1). Paul refers to Christians, and only Christians as children of Abraham (Galatians 3:9; 29; Romans 2:29). I think it is safe to say, in light of the name of these tribes, that ethnic Jews are not excluded from the kingdom of God, assuming they have faith. Paul offers himself as a prime example (Romans 11:1). We can also recognize that it was through the Jews that God would preserve His seed and present His Gospel as a sort of **"root"** of the Christian faith (Romans 11:16).

But in the New Covenant (which is what Revelation is primarily concerned with) the Kingdom of God extends to every **"tribe and tongue and people and nation"** (Revelation 5:9). What I think is beautifully seen here, as we move from the first half of chapter seven to the second, is that transition. That which was initially restricted to Israel has blossomed into that which is innumerable.

If you can stay with me just a moment longer, what we have here are twelve tribes (though modified) multiplied by twelve (keeping in mind that Revelation has a *twelve* orientation-the New Jerusalem is twelve thousand furlongs, having twelve gates named after twelve tribes with a wall that is twelve times twelve with twelve pearls and twelve fruits, etc., Revelation 21, 22). This twelve times twelve is then multiplied by one thousand, which more times than not, in Scripture is speaking of that which is beyond number (Psalm 50:10).

All this to say that the **"great multitude which no one could number"** (Revelation 7:9) are the same people referenced in the 144,000 but from a different perspective. Keep in mind that pattern we see many times in Revelation when John hears then looks (Revelation 1:10-13; 5:5, 6; 6:1-8). He hears of the Lion then looks and sees a Lamb (Revelation 5:5, 6). He hears the number, 144,000 (Revelation 7:4), then looks and beholds **"a great multitude"** (Revelation 7:9).

So why the two perspectives? First, God has His own numbered in minute detail. In what appears to be an indiscernible mass of nameless people, we can be assured He knows us. David was writing in a very individual manner when he rejoiced that God searched him and knew him (Psalm 139:1).

Second, as discussed last time (comparing this to Ezekiel 9 and God's protection of His own when Israel was destroyed by Babylon), there is God's oversight and protection from the predators of this world. To be sure, every person who heeded Jesus' counsel to flee Judea eventually died. But it would not be as collateral damage in the judgment upon Jerusalem. God has a day when He will call us home and the means by which it will take place (Hebrews 9:27).

We tend to view these seals or marks as if they only happen in a very unique generation. But everyone has one. We either owned by the world or by Christ. We are either in either the first or second Adam. And if it is the latter, then the second half of chapter seven belongs to us.

Sheltered With His Presence

It is with some apprehension that we will rush through these verses. I am reminded of an art lover who once took me to a museum. After spending about three seconds looking at some classic masterpiece, I walked on only to be met by a scolding. "Do you have any idea how long it took to paint that and what it represents?" I can't help thinking that in the midst of the soon coming severe events, the members of these seven churches spent a good bit of time enjoying the latter half of this chapter. Those who were sealed on earth and are now saved in heaven.

This multitude beyond numbering, at first blush, seems to contradict "**many are called but few chosen**" (Matthew 22:14) and "**narrow is the gate**" (Matthew 7:14). Yet Jesus is speaking of His current context, and this should not be considered a prediction of the ineffectiveness of the Gospel throughout history. The prophetic indicators of the success of the Gospel use language similar seen in this chapter; things like "**stars of heaven and as sand that is on the seashore**" (Genesis 22:17).

This heavenly, international throng of worship so diminishes the trials of this world that Paul says they are not worthy of comparison (Romans 8:18). The "**white robes**" indicating the effectiveness of the cleansing blood of Christ, presenting His bride "**without spot or wrinkle**" (Ephesians 5:27). We

see here a provision and blessing unique to what Christ can, and has, accomplished.

Living in an increasing pluralistic society, many view religion as a sort of smorgasbord where the consumer picks and chooses according to our liking. But cleansing from sin is nowhere to be found on the counter. I recently listened to a brief lecture on the supposed beauty and hope of purgatory, where we climb the tiers to our own final redemption. But these saints move immediately from tribulation to praise before the throne. Let us not lose sight of this blessed reality-that everything said of these saints, in terms of their status before God, is currently true of us, if we are in Christ (Romans 8:30; Ephesians 2:6).

The **“palm branches”** indicate victory and steadfastness (Psalm 92:12). Among the remarkable aspects of this worship is the response of the angels when the multitude cries out its praises **“Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”** The angels, who had never fallen, and were never even in need of salvation, fall on their faces in worship, as if overwhelmed by the mere witnessing of this great redemption (1 Peter 1:12).

And that which is not readily apparent in most English translations is the definite article associated with these praiseworthy attributes. It is **“the blessing and the glory and the wisdom and the thanksgiving and the honor and the power and the might”** meaning it can be said only of God.

In light of all of this, there is little wonder that Paul (who at some level had witnessed this-2 Corinthians 12:1-3) could unhesitatingly say,

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain (Philippians 1:21).

The original readers of all of this throne-room-talk, and worship would naturally gravitate to temple worship. But in the New Jerusalem there is no temple.

And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb (Revelation 21:22).

Verse fifteen is better translated by the ESV.

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 (literally, will tent among them) with his presence (Revelation 7:15-parenthesis mine).

The physical temple would soon be destroyed because it had served its purpose and, among other things, had become a distraction. The same can be said of any religious pursuit or activity. Our praises, the sacraments, our readings, our offerings, our sermons, our very gathering, is only valuable to the extent that it heralds Christ. These saints, all saints, need to know that their shelter is not a temple or a church building or some fortified city but the **“city that is to come” (Hebrews 13:14)**. It can be thought of as a vast sanctuary.

It is in that city, the **“city of the living God” (Hebrews 12:22)** that we find our true and eternal refuge. It is there that we will appreciate that our true refuge is found, for Christ is our shelter. Shelter from what? Sin, its curse, and its inevitable and eternal death. I find myself comforted by the fact that no matter how beautiful the language of Scripture, it can never fully capture the glory and majesty of heaven. John puts it this way:

They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; ¹⁷ for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes (Revelation 7:16, 17).

This is where we are ever called to fix our eyes (Hebrews 12:2). Usually something we only do in the midst of struggle. I recall years ago I was anticipating a number of weeks of an unrelenting schedule, morning and evening. It was going to culminate with a wedding, which, as joyous as they are, can be tiring to officiate. I realized that the wedding would end with a reception where I would sit with my wife and enjoy a glass of wine. It was the expectation of that moment that helped me through my moments of exhaustion. But that pales in comparison to the anticipation of the full consummation of **“the marriage supper of the Lamb” (Revelation 19:9)**. In order to properly endure the trials of today, our eyes must ever be fixed upon that which is eternal, our eternal sabbath rest.

Questions for Study

1. What are ways people seek meaning in their lives? What makes people special (pages 3, 4).
2. Discuss some of the various positions on who the 144,000 are. What are the strengths and weaknesses of these positions (pages 4, 5)?
3. Why does John list the Twelve Tribes? What is the significance of this (page 5)?
4. Why are we given two perspectives of God's people in chapter seven (pages 5, 6)?
5. Does everyone have some type of mark or seal? How do you know what yours is (page 6)?
6. How do we explain that few are chosen when this chapter speaks of an innumerable multitude (page 6)?
7. Explain the white robes and palm branches. What do they indicate (pages 6, 7)?
8. To what extent are religious pursuits valuable? What makes them so (pages 7, 8)?
9. In what respect is Jesus a shelter (page 8)?