

8. The 144,000 Sealed and the Great Multitude in White Robes (Revelation 7)

Although many describe chapter 7 as an interlude, the chapter is actually a continuation of the thought closing chapter 6. The sixth seal opens with a description of events leading up to the great day of the wrath of God and the Lamb. It is logical to ask, "What about the righteous? What happens to them prior the great day of the Lord?" The fifth seal had opened to the question of what had happened to the souls of those slain because of the word of God and their testimony. They were given white robes to wear until the number of their fellow servants who were to be killed were completed [See notes on Revelation 6:9-11]. In chapter 7 we find that the great multitude that no one could count wore white robes [See notes to follow on Revelation 7:9 and 14]. Further, these stand before the throne of God in state opposite to the evil ones of Revelation 6:12-17. Thus, chapter 7 is a continuation of the thought that closes chapter 6.

144,000 Sealed (Revelation 7:1-8)

7:1 After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree.

During the events affecting the wicked, a simultaneous set of events occurs among the righteous. Just as the Lord described the events affecting the wicked, he also described the status of his elect in Matthew 24:31: "They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. 31 And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other."

These angels and those of Matthew 24:31 seem similar to those of horses and chariots of Ezekiel and the four living creatures, who control the four horseman in chapter 6. That is, the coming of the end and the application of God's will are strictly under His control. He is the Alpha and the Omega. In this case, the angels hold back the four winds in an effort to harm the land and the sea. However, the angel from the east commands them to stop.

2 Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: 3 "Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God." 4 Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.

5 From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed,

from the tribe of Reuben 12,000,

from the tribe of Gad 12,000,

6 from the tribe of Asher 12,000,

from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000,

from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000,

7 from the tribe of Simeon 12,000,

from the tribe of Levi 12,000,

from the tribe of Issachar 12,000,

8 from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000,

from the tribe of Joseph 12,000,

from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000.

The command not to harm the land and the sea stays the destruction and harm until they put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of God. Those sealed are clearly stated. They are the servants of our God; they were all from the tribes of Israel; and they are designated as being 144,000. We shall consider these in order.

At the Last Day, God will gather his servants. To these, described as from the tribes of Israel, God adds the great multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language of those who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb (7:14). This first group is definitely the group of Revelation 14:1-4, where they also are called 144,000. They had distinct characteristics:

- They had the name of the Lamb and the name of the Father written on their foreheads.
- They had been redeemed from the earth.
- They kept themselves pure.
- They follow the Lamb wherever he goes.
- They are first fruits of God and the Lamb.

Chapter 14 calls them firstfruits. As firstfruits, they are those first Christians, perhaps even prior to the Gentiles' conversion of Acts 10, sealed by the Holy Spirit as in Acts 2:38. Following the firstfruits of the sacrificial laws of the Old Testament, the earliest Christians are separated from the huge number of those to follow in verse 16: Therefore, the 144,000 are those earliest Christians who followed the Lamb and accepted the saviour, lived pure lives, and followed him without exception:

3 Israel was holy to the LORD,
the firstfruits of his harvest;
all who devoured her were held guilty,
and disaster overlook them,"
declares the LORD. Jeremiah 2:3

James extends this metaphor to the early Jewish Christians in James 1:1: "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations." James expands on the image in James 1:18: "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created."

The number 144,000 limits the size of this particular group of the saved to a finite but large number. One should compare this number to the huge number, which no one can count—a number also identified in the group of those sealed in verse 16.

Sealing and seals carried special meaning for the Jews. However, the word and meaning carried forward to the sealing of the servants of God in the New Testament. The sealing of the children of Israel occurred in Exodus 28:21: "21 There are to be twelve stones, one for each of the names of the sons of Israel, each engraved like a seal with the name of one of the twelve tribes." In the same context in Exodus 28:36-37, Aaron was given a seal that marked him as Holy to the Lord: "36 'Make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it as on a seal: HOLY TO THE LORD. 37 Fasten a blue cord to it to attach it to the turban; it is to be on the front of the turban.'" In the New Testament, the seal of God's servants became the very Spirit of God in our hearts. In 2 Corinthians 1:21-22, Paul said, "21 Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, 22 set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit guaranteeing what is to come." We are also marked in him with a seal: "Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit." Ephesians 1:13. Eph 4:30 extends this thought, "30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption."

This sealing is an event that is continuous and parallel to the other events characterized by the opening of the seven seals. One can contrast this marking with a seal by the Holy Spirit with that mark of the beast applied to the servants of the Satan discussed in Revelation 13:16-17; 14:9-11; 16:2. As the seal of the Holy Spirit marks the servants of God, so the mark of the beast marks the servants of Satan.

The Great Multitude from the Tribulation: (Revelation 7:9-17)

9 After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. 10 And they cried out in a loud voice:

*"Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb."*

In addition to firstfruits who were sealed, innumerable hosts were before the throne of God. The white robes are clearly those given to the slain for the word of God. This group is broader than the firstfruits and of an infinite number. They represent the whole creation and every nation of the Lord's great commission. As they cry out, they recognize that salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb. The praise echoes the meaning of Peter in Acts 4:12, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

11 All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying:

*"Amen!
Praise and glory
and wisdom and thanks and honor
and power and strength
be to our God for ever and ever.
Amen!"*

In addition to the innumerable hosts, the angels and the elders still stand before the throne of God. The "amen" is attached to the praise of the multitude of the saved. They were falling down and worshipping God, recognizing Him as all-wise and all-powerful, and worthy of thanks and honor. God exists for ever and ever or into the ages of the ages. The difference in these attributes of God and the idols and philosophers of the world becomes clear.

13 Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes - who are they, and where did they come from?"

14 I answered, "Sir, you know."

And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

An important question comes up. Who are the innumerable hosts? Where did they come from? The two-part answer given by the elders describes them as those who were slain for the word and testimony of the Lamb, discussed above. The innumerable hosts are the servants of God who have come out of the great tribulation. They came out of that tribulation with robes washed white in the blood of the Lamb. John names the specific tribulation in Revelation 1:9: "9 I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus." The great

tribulation confronts all Christians who war against the flesh and the world. In Acts 9:15-16, the Lord said of Paul, "This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. 16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." John himself identified the struggle in Rev 2:10, "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life." Of all Christians Paul wrote in Rom 8:35-36:

35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? 36 As it is written:

"For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

The tribulation is upon us and is not some episode of the future as millennial sophistry would say. It is a spiritual struggle and continues in the lives of all Christians according to Paul in Eph 6:12-13: "12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

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 spread his tent over them. 1*

*6 Never again will they hunger;
never again will they thirst.*

*The sun will not beat upon them,
nor any scorching heat.*

*17 For the Lamb at the center of the throne
will be their shepherd;*

he will lead them to springs of living water.

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

The allusion in verses 16 and 17 is Isaiah 49:10. The allusion in verse 17 is Isaiah 25:8. This episode of the Revelation ends with the complete victory of God and the Lamb. The servants of God who are sealed are before the throne. Each episode that follows, with its sequence of events, will end with this same victory.

The victory for the saints is the same as that with which the Revelation concludes in Rev 21:1-4:

21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

The opening of the seventh seal brings the wicked and righteous right up to the great day of the Lord. Through it all, God is the Alpha and the Omega. Rev 21:6-8 teaches emphatically:

6 He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. 7 He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son. 8 But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."