God’s Servants Shall Stand

Introduction:

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Last time, our study in Revelation ended on a cliffhanger. Chapter 6 presents some very challenging passages to address, in addition to some dreadful imagery which leads us to ask the same question as comes at the end of the chapter: Considering all these terrible things - Who can stand?

That’s the point of chapter 7, it is a “time-out”, or an interlude removed from any chronological sequence which may be present in chapters 6 and 8. It is important to remember when reading Revelation that when you see the phrase “after this I saw” it does not always mean the earthly events which the symbols represent occur chronologically, but instead that these visions themselves were given subsequently in this order. This chapter steps out of time, as far as the order of events as they would play out in the world, to give us the answer to the question raised at the end of chapter 6. Chapter 7 is readily divided into two sections which take place at two different points in time. The exact time is not the important factor here but instead the time each event occurs in relation to the seven seals of chapters 6 and 8. The difficulty and main source of controversy in this chapter, according to most of what you will read in commentaries and extra-Biblical material, centers around the identity of the two groups in this chapter: The 144,000 and the Great Multitude from Every Nation. Though these are the two major symbolic elements which draw the most attention in the chapter, they are certainly not the only ones.

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Revelation 7:1-17 - 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. 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, saying, “Do not harm the earth, the sea, or the trees till we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.”

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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: 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; 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; 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; 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.

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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, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” 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, saying: “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom, Thanksgiving and honor and power and might, Be to our God forever and ever. Amen.”

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Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, “Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?” 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. 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. They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; 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.”

The 144,000 - Revelation 7:1-8:

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As we look at the first half of chapter 7 covering the 144,000, the first three verses of the chapter introduce 7 new symbolic elements which need to be at least basically defined in order to grasp what this chapter is saying. This is especially true considering that about a third of Johnny’s questions deal with these three verses. Also, the remaining verses of this passage don’t contain much additional detail but rather present the picture of the 144,000.

There are many who get lost looking for all the possible application and detail to be found in the symbols of Revelation. We certainly don’t want to do that. However, the chapter makes it clear that at least some of these elements introduced in the first three verses are not literal in their identity. The key for us is not always look for specific earthly identities or corresponding earthly figures, but to find the fundamental meanings of these symbols in the Old Testament. They do not change in nature, though the things to which they are specifically referring do change depending on the context. The symbols presented in the first three verses are:

1. The Four Angels standing at the Four Corners of the Earth holding the Four Winds of the Earth.

2. The Angel ascending from the East carrying the Seal of the living God.

3. The Earth, Sea, and Trees

Before we get into a deeper discussion of these symbols, I want to remind us of a few things brother Ron Courter says in preparing to study Revelation about correctly identifying the meaning of symbols in the book:

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In Revelation, we reverse our standard method of interpretation so that we take everything symbolically unless we are forced to take it literally. This passage does not allow us to recognize the winds, earth, sea, and trees as being literal. Verse 3 makes it clear that if this wind were to blow on the earth, sea, and trees then mankind would be harmed. A similar statement is made later in Revelation 9:3. First, the people of God must be sealed and protected before this wind can be allowed to blow. If these three elements did not somehow involve or refer to man, what would be the need for protecting them until the servants of God were sealed? G. K. Beale in his commentary on Revelation explains the connection this way:

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“Whether the three objects to be affected by the winds are literal is not crucial, since together with the winds they form a picture representing the woes of Revelation 6:1-8 and are to be understood likewise. Probably earth, sea, and trees represent (by metonymy) the earth and its inhabitants, who are affected by the woes of the four horsemen from the preceding chapter.”

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Ron Courter explains the symbolism of the winds in this way saying: “They are symbols of God’s action. Basically, they are symbols of His destructiveness Jeremiah 49:36.”

Albertus Pieters says they are the impending judgments of God described as a storm and William Hendricksen likewise simply calls them the four winds of judgment.

Alan F. Johnson says, “Since nowhere in Revelation do we read of the four winds actually blowing, they may be taken as representing the earthly catastrophes that occur under the trumpets and bowls.”

Ray Summers, G. K. Beale, Michael Wilcock, G. B. Caird, say that the four winds are a secondary symbol of the four horsemen, of destructive, judgmental powers.

Johnny Elmore in Question 6 refers to the angels holding the winds as the angels of destruction.

Contextually, each explanation can fit, and it is difficult to decide between the narrower or more general views. We can say with some confidence that the answer does indeed lie somewhere in these viewpoints as in the passage we see that these winds have the power to harm. The earth, sea, and trees must also be symbolic, including mankind in their scope, otherwise there isn’t much meaning at all in restraining the winds so that they do not harm these elements, thus jeopardizing the safety of the servants of God.

Now, you might think I am going too far in depth on these few symbols. However, let me assure you that this is the simplest summary I could give while still retaining important information these bring to our attention. Understanding at least these basics is necessary to seeing when the events of chapter 7 occur in relation to chapters 6 and 8. I won’t go into more detail in attempts to identify the winds beyond the general sense that they are destructive forces as this will suffice for our study of chapter 7 as a whole. However, you may want to take the time to study these positions out further and consider the evidences given on both sides. We simply do not have the time to spend on this discussion, though I believe you will find it worthwhile.

I prepared handout containing additional material on these subjects for anyone who wishes to look at them in more depth. You may or may not feel like you find a definitive conclusion, as even preachers known for their study of Revelation do not totally agree on some of the identifications to be made in chapters 6-9. So whatever conclusion you reach, you will be in good company.

To summarize, it seems to me that these angels are not themselves wicked angels, but they are servants of God. They are shown in a way that implies their cooperation with the angel who ascends from the east, relaying the order for them to restrain these winds of destruction until the servants of God are sealed. They seem to be servants of God appointed to the duty of overseeing the destruction unleashed by the winds and keeping them in check. An overarching theme present in chapter 7 is God’s absolute sovereignty over all things, which is profoundly repeated throughout the book. Seeing the winds as a summary of the destructive things described in chapter 6 shows God’s power and authority over these terrible things, providing His servants who must face them with awesome comfort. This is also brought out in the description of the angels standing at the four corners of the earth. This is a symbolic phrase intended to show God’s will exercised over the entirety of the earth. Nothing is outside of His authority, even powers of destruction.

There is one more thing we need to examine before we look at the meaning of the 144,000 and that is the seal of God. Johnny’s questions direct our attention to Ezekiel 9:1-11 which will help us to begin to understand the purpose and meaning of this seal.

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Ezekiel 9:1-11 - Then He called out in my hearing with a loud voice, saying, “Let those who have charge over the city draw near, each with a deadly weapon in his hand.” And suddenly six men came from the direction of the upper gate, which faces north, each with his battle-ax in his hand. One man among them was clothed with linen and had a writer’s inkhorn at his side. They went in and stood beside the bronze altar.

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Now the glory of the God of Israel had gone up from the cherub, where it had been, to the threshold of the temple. And He called to the man clothed with linen, who had the writer’s inkhorn at his side; and the Lord said to him, “Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and cry over all the abominations that are done within it.”

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To the others He said in my hearing, “Go after him through the city and kill; do not let your eye spare, nor have any pity. Utterly slay old and young men, maidens and little children and women; but do not come near anyone on whom is the mark; and begin at My sanctuary.” So they began with the elders who were before the temple. Then He said to them, “Defile the temple, and fill the courts with the slain. Go out!” And they went out and killed in the city. So it was, that while they were killing them, I was left alone; and I fell on my face and cried out, and said, “Ah, Lord God! Will You destroy all the remnant of Israel in pouring out Your fury on Jerusalem?”

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Then He said to me, “The iniquity of the house of Israel and Judah is exceedingly great, and the land is full of bloodshed, and the city full of perversity; for they say, ‘The Lord has forsaken the land, and the Lord does not see!’ And as for Me also, My eye will neither spare, nor will I have pity, but I will recompense their deeds on their own head.” Just then, the man clothed with linen, who had the inkhorn at his side, reported back and said, “I have done as You commanded me.”

Homer Hailey in his commentary, which is the one Johnny initially used when writing our questions, draws comparisons between this passage in Ezekiel and Revelation chapter 7. He notes that in Ezekiel rather than the servants of God being sealed it says they are marked. He does not say anything about this difference other than noting it is there. I think from related passages in Revelation we can conclude there isn’t any substantial difference between the two as both indicate the ownership and authority of God over His servants.

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Revelation 9:4 - They were commanded not to harm the grass of the earth, or any green thing, or any tree, but only those men who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads.

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Revelation 14:1-4 - Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father’s name written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, like the voice of many waters, and like the voice of loud thunder. And I heard the sound of harpists playing their harps. They sang as it were a new song before the throne, before the four living creatures, and the elders; and no one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth. These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb.

You can also look at Revelation chapter 13 regarding the mark of the Beast as paralleling this idea of ownership or allegiance and service. G. K. Beale says this in his commentary:

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“‘To seal’ can also have the sense of ‘to authenticate’ and ‘to designate ownership of,’ which are included with the idea of ‘protection’ here. As the saints are empowered to persevere through adversity, the genuineness of their profession is authenticated, and they are shown truly to belong to God. The fact that those who are sealed are called ‘slaves/servants of God’ highlights the idea of ownership, since it was a common practice in the ancient world to mark slaves on the forehead to indicate who owned them and to whom they owed service.”

Now, I think it is important that we recognize what protection was afforded to the servants of God. This sealing does not represent some mystical protection from the earthly, physical forces of destruction or persecution. Rather, the sealing represents their spiritual surety and protection. Though they might suffer and die in the world, nothing can affect their standing in eternity provided they persevere and are faithful to God. This is made clear in Revelation 6:11 which says:

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Revelation 6:11 - Then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them 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.

I think the best summary you can give to explain this seal in Revelation 7:1-4 comes from 2 Timothy 2:19:

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2 Timothy 2:19 - Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: “The Lord knows those who are His,” and, “Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity.”

You’ll find in your studies that some commentators try to identify exactly what this seal is beyond the concepts we’ve noticed in the scriptures. I don’t think you will find much more information, at least very little new information, than what we covered. Notice, John did not witness the sealing take place, he only records the numbers of those who were sealed. It makes sense then that he does not presume to explain and describe the seal in detail. The important thing for us to understand about this seal is that it represents absolute, unfailing assurance of salvation. This point is made clear in verses 4-8 where these symbolic numerical figures are used and repeated to emphasize to the utmost extent how certain the salvation of God’s servants will be.

There are a lot of proposed mathematical equations for how this number came to be or what it means in its various parts. Many of these break the larger numbers down into smaller, common symbolic numbers from apocalyptic literature but I don’t think it is necessary to go to far into this breakdown. Homer Hailey’s explanation is simple and stays very close to the information given to us in this passage. He says:

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“The most reasonable view is that twelve, the religious number, multiplied by itself and then by one thousand, indicating fullness or completeness, represents the total number of saints on earth at any given time.”

He mentions an important detail there: The 144,000 represent the total number of saints on earth at any given time. This is not the number of all who will be saved. If this were a literal number of all the people who will be saved, then I’m not sure what to say about the number of people we’ve reached with our Facebook Bible study advertisements other than:

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Mission accomplished?

Hailey’s comments also apply to another widely held idea about this group. Some take the phrase “tribes of the children of Israel” literally and say that this group only applies to Israelites. This viewpoint raises several difficulties for those who hold to it. One of the most difficult problems with this view is that if the sealing represents the certainty of your spiritual well-being through persecution, earthly trials, and the great tribulation, do the Gentile nations not have such assurance? Instead of viewing either aspect, the name or number, of this group as literal, we need to understand that they are figurative. The New Testament presents us with the idea of a spiritual Israel which is also the group under consideration here in chapter 7. The Bible says in:

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Romans 9:6 - But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel

Galatians 6:15-16 - For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation. And as many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

The Great Multitude - Revelation 7:9-17:

If we combine all that we have learned about the winds, the seal, and the 144,000 of the children of Israel, we now have the keys we need to put together the structure of Revelation chapter 7. The winds being restrained until after the 144,000 were sealed tells us that Revelation 7:1-8 is something set in order prior to the events of Revelation chapter 6. The 144,000 are not a separate and distinct group from the Great Multitude but instead are the same group at different points in time. Revelation 7:9-17 is a picture of the future state of the believers after they have persevered and gained the victory of salvation, standing before the throne of God.

The information we have about the Great Multitude further supports the conclusion that 144,000 cannot be the literal number of saved people as this was an innumerable host from all tribes, tongues, and nations. The picture we have of this multitude is one of victory and praise to God for their salvation, for the answer to the cry for vengeance in Revelation 6:9-11. Revelation 7:9 refers to the feast of the booths in Leviticus 23:40 which says:

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Leviticus 23:40 - And you shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of beautiful trees, branches of palm trees, the boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days.

This presents this multitude as priests performing worship to God. This was a sacred assembly and a holy convocation. In this feast praise was offered to God for salvation, which is echoed in the praise offered here before the throne. It’s interesting that one of the elders turns to John and asks him “Who are these people and where did they come from?” I doubt that he didn’t know who they were, but the question instead seems accommodative to the vision. John explains: “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.” The American Standard Version shows us that John’s answer indicates that there are continually people coming out of the great tribulation rather than understanding it as something that is already past. Since the whole purpose of this chapter is to answer the question: Who can stand, regarding the events of chapter 6 then I would identify the great tribulation as consisting of all the woes listed in chapter 6. The things covered in that chapter are continually at work in the world and the message for the servants of God is a reminder that they will come, and we must persevere.

Many have tried to assign specific catastrophes from the past or dream up devastating destructions to come as the identity of the Great Tribulation. However, I believe both ideas go against the purpose and message of the book of Revelation. The book certainly had immediate interpretation and application to its readers, but it also has application for the reader of any age who finds himself in similar circumstances as are covered in the book. Chapter 7 can be tricky to understand due to the way it deals with time while also being removed from time. The 144,000 seem to be presented as an absolute, certain number, as an assurance that no matter the age the people of God as a group are under His protection and authority. The 144,000 is not a dynamic changing group like the Great Multitude, but instead it is fixed as identifying God’s people regardless of time. Anyone who has been sealed, who is a servant of God, enjoys His spiritual protection.

Conclusion:

Chapter 7 concludes with a wonderful reminder of the reward God’s people can look forward to if they persevere and overcome these things which come against us in the world. I could summarize these rewards and promises, but I think I’d rather read the inspired words of John who says it better than I would:

Revelation 7:15-17 - 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. They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; 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.

In summary, **chapter 7** presents a before and after scene. The before are the **144,000** prior to the opening of the first six seals. The after occurs at the end of time when these have entered their rest in eternity. The intermediary stage of the saints who have died is shown in seal 5 where they are the souls under the altar. **Verse 11** states they must wait until the number was completed. So, the first vision shows God’s unfailing protection of His people as they enter the great tribulation and the second vision shows the completed number of the fellow servants and brethren who have come through the great tribulation. These have now come before the throne of God where they will enjoy His presence, worship Him, and never sorrow again for eternity.

It’s somewhat ironic that so many people today believe that the **144,000** in this chapter are the only people who will go to Heaven and the **Great Multitude** somehow represents people who will remain on the Earth, but from our study we’ve seen that the opposite is true. If the **144,000** were in Heaven, what need would they have for God’s protective seal? Why would the angels be concerned about restraining the winds so that no harm could befall them until they were sealed? If the **Great Multitude** was to remain on the earth, how could they be in the presence of God worshiping Him and enjoying eternal rest for their souls?

**Chapter 7** is a wonderful pause from the frightening scenes of the troubles of this world and of God’s coming wrath and judgment on a wicked world. It presents us with the picture of our blessed hope, while also reminding us that God knows the exact number of His people. They are sealed for salvation and He watches over them, protecting their souls from any harm. There is far more that could be said and studied from **Revelation chapter 7** and I would encourage all of you to take the time to look deeper into the chapter for yourself. I hope the things we’ve covered have been encouraging considering the wonderful promises God makes for His people and in knowing that even through the worst things the world can throw at us, we have victory in Christ.

If you need to make your life right with God either by obeying the Gospel call or by reconciling your life with him through confession of sin and repentance, don’t wait any longer. God is patient, loving, gracious, and kind, but the day is coming when the number of His people will be complete and the time for repentance and obedience is over. Make sure you are counted among the number of His people. If we can assist you in any way, come forward while we sing.