

Revelation 7

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Some background and the big picture: All of Revelation 7 is an *interlude*. This interlude, in two parts, comes between seals 6 and 7. This happens again in the seven trumpets with another interlude, in two parts, between trumpets 6 and 7. But note that there is no interlude within the seven bowls, and that is very significant. Interludes suggest delay. Interludes will cease.

The two interludes follow limited yet heavy judgments from God. In both seals and trumpets the narrative pauses. This shows that the moment of final judgment is not upon us yet. The final judgment is *shown* in seal six, but in this narrative that future certainty awaits other developments. The fifth seal spoke of more to be killed (6:11). The final judgment must come after that. Later, in the bowls, the narrative will include no gospel proclamation. Revelation will even say there will be no further delay in the final judgment (10:6). Before John saw the plagues of chapter 16, he saw *a sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished* (15:1)¹.

Earlier, the messages of judgment allowed for repentance and served as warnings, yet the sixth trumpet ends with no repentance at all (9:20,21). That stark fact is the bleak background for the ministry of the word in chapters 10 & 11, by which the Lord would bring about the salvation of a vast number. We know this because when “... *the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever’*” (11:15). This is utterly wonderful, and such things appear in Revelation in a variety of places, yet somehow that element of massive grace saving a vast multitude has been overlooked and underemphasized. Revelation weaves from a message of judgment in many words to one of salvation in a few. At the Second Coming, both salvation and judgment will be finalized. Mercy will be discontinued, and opposition eradicated, while God walks with man again on this earth. This is seen in the end of the book in the holy city which has the glory and favor of God, while the lake of fire has as its eternal fuel the wrath of the Lamb.

7:1-3 To understand the opening words of chapter 7, we need the closing words of chapter 6: “*The great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?” When the great day of wrath arrives rebels cannot stand, and they assume that no one else can either. It is typical of Revelation to sharpen an answer by a leading question to ready us for the intended reply. The gospel truth is that God’s wrath has been turned away from those who “*have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb*” (7:14), “*those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life*” (21:27). His people can stand. It is the wicked who cannot stand in the judgment (Psalm 1:5). For those in*

¹ Some teach that there are a series of final judgments, final for this group and then final for another. These include the moment of the coming of Christ with His armies in Revelation 19 (note especially v.19), and then after a literal period of a thousand years there will be yet another judgment at the Great White Throne. It is exceedingly difficult to have a chronology of more than one time when the wrath of God is finished, as it is with the seven bowls according to Revelation 15:1. The great day (singular) of the wrath of the One on the throne and the Lamb is simply one event. In other words there would be no more delay, “but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as he announced to his servants the prophets” (10:6,7).

the book of life, the Lord does not mark iniquities; they have received forgiveness (Psalm 130:3,4). In this grace we stand secure (Romans 5:1,2).

The imagery is of destruction held back, yet the great day of wrath is coming. Revelation is clear about that. Will the Lord's people suffer the horror of God's wrath which is seen in 6:12-17? A certain angel addresses the four angels holding back the wind. He appears with a seal and with loud instructions to hold off on judgment. He announces the sealing of "the servants of our God". In Ezekiel 9, agents of divine wrath were to kill the wicked, but those who sighed and groaned over the abominations committed in Jerusalem were marked on their foreheads. No one so marked was to be struck; they were protected. God was making a distinction as to who were really His own.

A special angel Now and then an individual angel shows up in Revelation. We should not only expect this, but follow it eagerly. The revelation of Jesus Christ is to be made known to John *by means of* an individual angel to be sent by Christ to his servant/prophet/apostle John (1:1). Since this is in the opening sentence of the book, we should be on the lookout for that angel. A mighty angel appears in 5:2 and 10:1, and now in 7:2 a single angel ascends from the rising of the sun. He is not labeled in chapter 7 as a mighty angel, but he has the rank to order the agents of judgment to hold back until God's servants are sealed. In chapter 5 the angel of 1:1 speaks of this all-important scroll. In 10:8,9, he holds the scroll opened by the Lamb. John is told to take it from the angel (the language of reception in chapter 5), and he was told to eat it. Note that it went from the One on the throne, to the Lamb, to the angel, to John, in three steps of transmission. Another parallel is noteworthy: in chapter 7 this angel has the seal of the Living God. In chapter 10 an individual angel has the scroll "*that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land.*" The flow of the narrative is clear: the scroll was opened by the Lamb, given to and thus held by this angel, and finally given to John to eat. That is a delivery right to the body of the recipient, somewhat similar to a seal being placed on the forehead (7:3). That angel is an unusual angel. He stands apart, so I speculate that he might be the one referred to in the opening verse of Revelation. When we study chapter 10 together, we shall consider my proposal that the angel of 1:1 is the angel of 5:2, and 10:1-6. He is also the angel referred to in 22:6, but not the one speaking to John in that same verse. The angel mentioned in 7:2 does not appear in a *revelatory* role. The absence of that element removes him from certain identification as the angel of 1:1.

The purpose of the seal applied to these servants is their protection. The winds will be unleashed, but they will not destroy God's servants. They have the seal of the living God. God will respect His own seal. By it He identifies the 144,000 as His own. That seal on their foreheads is the name of the Lamb and the name of His Father written. The blood applied on the door frames of Israelites identified them as the Lord's. They were immune from the wrath to be poured on Egypt; so it will be with the 144,000. Three passages in Revelation are needed to interpret who is sealed, and a fourth helps.

The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and *I will write on him the name of my God*, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, *and my own new name*" (Revelation 3:12).

"Do not harm ... until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads." (7:3). This seal is "the seal of the living God" (7:2).

"Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had *his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads*" (14:1).

They [demons] were told not to harm ... but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads (9:4).

No angel of God would ever move against anyone marked with that seal. In 3:12 we find that the one who overcomes (or conquers) will have Christ write on him the name of His God plus Christ's own new name as well.² Those who conquer are believers, because not one will accept the mark of the beast. True believers win by successful resistance to the pressure and deceit of the beast. All of God's servants have the name of God applied; all are sealed. When demons were loosed to afflict all but God's people, they could not harm those with "*the seal of God on their foreheads*" (9:4). Thus the 144,000 has reference to all of the servants of our God. They are the Lord's army. That seal is not the possession of a few, limited to a measurable number, a literal limitation of 144,000 persons, because the true number of those sealed cannot be counted by man. The seal does not set aside only some believers, because all who conquer have it, as in 3:12. The simplicity of Revelation is that one has either the seal of the living God or the mark of the wicked beast. This means the seal does not designate a specific service for some, which other believers do not have. The 144,000 "*have been redeemed from the earth*" (14:3) which describes *all* who belong to Christ. Likewise, the great multitude of 7:9 are redeemed from the earth; therefore the sealed 144,000 includes them, as well as all the ransomed in 5:9. It is very awkward to have a sealed and redeemed group of human converts in Revelation who are different from a group of sealed and redeemed human converts also within Revelation.

This is another paradox of Revelation: in 6:11, the number of servants yet to be killed is not complete. Vengeance is delayed until they are. Yet being slain, by rejecting the mark of the beast, is in fact conquering the beast (15:2). This results immediately in standing before the throne of God and of the Lamb (7:9), crying out joyfully that salvation (probably meaning *victory* in this context) belongs to our God. Standing before God was the very thing the wicked could not do in 6:17. The seal protects all who are His, and upon their death the Lamb's sheltering protection continues in full measure (7:15-17). In the thinking of the world, to be killed is to lose. In God's way of the cross, death for refusing to reject our Lord is to win.

Who are the 144,000? John heard with his ears the number of those sealed, then he looked with his eyes to see a great multitude. This is the same way he learned of the Lion of the Tribe of Judah; one of the elders *said* to him and thus John *heard*. Then he "*saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain*". The One of Whom he heard is the One he saw. The Lion and the Lamb are the same Person. So it is in Revelation 7. John heard of the 144,000 and then saw the multitude. They are the same group. Lion and Lamb indicate distinguishable roles of Christ, but both Lion and Lamb are Christ, so it is with the 144,000 and the great multitude; they are the same believers viewed from different angles. The 144,000 on earth are protected from one thing, while the great multitude in heaven is protected from everything. Sometimes we call these features "the church militant and the church triumphant".

² A later appendix will be devoted to the meaning of overcomes or conquers. I will take the position that this is a description of all believers, because none succumb to the deceit of the beast and the false prophet. In fact the seal of God protecting them from wrath must also protect them from apostasy.

The Lion is an image showing Christ's *militant* role, as the Root of David, or the stump of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1).³ Christ as a warring deliverer "*shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked*" (Isaiah 11:4). In both Isaiah 11 and Revelation 5, the Messiah is described as the Root. The militant aspect of Christ's coming should be read in the context of Isaiah 11. Revelation 7 gives a census of twelve tribes similar to the one in Numbers 1:1-46. That census was of males, old enough and *able to go to war* (Numbers 1:2,3). This army of 144,000 are those who "*follow the Lamb wherever He goes*" (14:4). In Revelation the only weapons in the Lord's army are the sword in the mouth of Christ and the rod in His hand (19:15). That the 144,000 do not defile themselves with women but were virgins (14:4) is not a statement that this number includes only chaste bachelors. This is a statement of their ritual purity alluded to in Deuteronomy 23:9-14, and stated more explicitly in 1 Samuel 21:4,5. This cultural tradition is also demonstrated in Uriah avoiding his wife's bed in 2 Samuel 11:8-11, because his fellow soldiers were on a military expedition. In Revelation 14 the sealed, devoted, disciplined, redeemed, and rejoicing army of 144,000 blameless soldiers are those who follow and live according to the ways of the Lamb. This is simply the standard for all in the church of Christ. Those who conquer (a description of all Christians) are those who are redeemed (a description of all Christians). All are sealed, a description of all Christians in 3:12.

The Lion is the Lamb As the Lamb He has conquered. By His blood He has ransomed for God a group which must be large since it is from every tribe, language, people and nation (5:9). This is a victory by self-sacrifice, converting the enemy, rather than destroying the enemy. This victory of this kind (shedding His blood rather than theirs) leads to those so ransomed ruling on the earth (5:10). That is quite a conquest!

The Paradox Both sides of this paradox are well established in Revelation. On one hand, there is the judgment in *their* blood in which the wicked are slain (19:13-21). The Lord's robes are dipped in the blood of His enemies (Isaiah 63:1-6). (Isaiah 63 is another OT text essential to understanding Revelation.) Christ will break the rebels with a rod of iron, like the smashing of pottery (Psalm 2). On the other hand, the Lord's ransomed army endures tribulation from those who dwell on the earth and willingly die. The whore of Babylon is drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus (17:6). The army of Christ follows Him wherever He goes, and like Him His own do not love their lives (12:11). They lay down their lives willingly, because those sealed as the Lord's (144,000 of them) will not accept the mark of the beast. By this non-violent means, God's unarmed army conquers by the blood of the Lamb and by the militant word of their testimony (12:11). The beast makes war on the saints and conquers them (13:7), but thereby the saints testify to the reality of Christ and the certainty of their hope in Him.

The 144,000 links to the Lion of the Tribe of Judah When the tribes are listed, Judah heads the list. This is a deliberate placement, because the Lion leads the nation in war. The census in OT history had a military motive. Such numbering

³ *Root* and *stump* are the same word in Greek in the texts now being considered, Revelation 5 and Isaiah 11. One will say Jesse and the other David. That kind of variation is common in Revelation.

showed the numerical strength of each tribe. Sometimes the tribes supplied an equal number for a military expedition, as in the case of defeating Midian in Numbers 31:1-7, when only a token force of 1000 each was sent into battle. Much later in OT history, the ten northern tribes of Israel were defeated and dispersed by Assyria; those remaining were adulterated by inter-marriage with Gentiles. This is the origin of Samaria. Yet the OT held out the hope that in the end they would return and *a united Israel* of all 12 tribes would fight in unity (Ezekiel 37:15-23). These ten northern tribes would join Judah and Benjamin, meaning all twelve will battle together, in armed resistance against their adversaries (Isaiah 11:11-16). Revelation 7 is a fulfillment of this prophecy.

The number is clearly symbolic This is an inspired book which comes to us in the format of apocalyptic literature and must be read that way. All those receiving Revelation in the first century knew that 144 is the square of twelve. They saw significance in numbers more than we do. The holy city of the new Jerusalem has a divine design to show its true character. As the bride of Christ the city is pure in character. The Jewish sense that twelve tribes gives the connotation of completeness and unity is written all over the holy city. The ideal numbers are multiples of twelve for gates, tribes, foundations, and apostles. Its length, width, and height were 12,000 stadia, making it a cube like unto the Most Holy place of the tabernacle in three equal dimensions (21:12-17). Even its walls are 144 cubits. So 144,000 stands for the entire body, the total number of saints sealed and ready to follow the Lamb.

The Lion is capable of battle, and He will conquer and save by being the Lamb. By taking up our cross we embrace our role as His followers: *“If anyone is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if anyone is to be slain with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints”* (13:10). Here is the call for service in the Lord’s army.

The numbering In actual number we are not 144,000. That was symbolism to show a complete army, mustered and ready. How many of us are there really? The Lord has carefully withheld the number of His elect, just as He has the date of His return. It is enough to say that redemption includes such a number that we can say, *“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever”* (11:15). Add to this the song of Moses and the Lamb which resonates with a very expansive note in Revelation 15:3,4:

"Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty!
Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations!
Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy.
All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.

We are only in chapter 7, but already the high expectation of a vast number of the redeemed is inescapable. *How* this happens is yet to come. That it will is revealed first. In the very first mention of the standing Lamb (dead lambs cannot stand) He, by His blood, has ransomed *“people for God from every tribe [of Israel and all other nations] and language and people and nation...”* (5:9). In 6:11 we know there is a complete number in the mind of God. The Lord explained that to the martyrs. Now in 7:9, the specific symbolic number became *“a great multitude that no one could number, from*

every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...”

This should really be no surprise at all. The Lord promised Jacob – on the very day he was named Israel – “*I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude*” (Genesis 32: 12). In Revelation 7 we see that multitude in John’s vision. This promise was enlarged when God said to Jacob/Israel: “*I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body*” (Genesis 35:11). The OT is replete with such promises of a multitude: “*the number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea...*” Hosea 1:10. (See also Genesis 15:5; 22:17; 26:4.)

Revelation 7 appears between seals six and seven in two segments with a double contrast. The magnitude of His people progresses from a specific number connected to one ethnic people to a number no man can count. The first lists tribes of Israel only; the second speaks of persons from *from all tribes*. The second group includes the tribes of Israel, while the tribes of Israel in the first group include in Christ all believers. Gentiles who have come to Christ have full citizenship in Israel. (See the Revelation 7 Appendix: The Identity of Israel.)

The ethnic difference There was a time when the people of God were almost exclusively the descendants of Abraham. The land was promised to descendants (Genesis 12:7), and great caution was exercised about allowing outsiders into Israel. (See Deuteronomy 23:3 and Nehemiah 13.) The NT assures all in Christ that we are “Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise” (Galatians 3:29). Long before this mystery came into full view (Ephesians 3:1-6), the OT predicted a multitude and that Gentiles would join Israel (Isaiah 14:1,2). It is a considerable surprise that the Apostle Paul spoke this way in connection with Hosea 1:10, because that text makes no mention of Gentiles, yet in Romans 9:24,25 Paul ties them right in with the people of Israel. When it comes to those who are in Christ, a difference that was is no more, and a countable number is overwhelmed in the vastness of God’s saving embrace.

7:9,10 John heard the census of Israel and turned to see the multitude. These are Gentiles galore, but the uncircumcised are now clean, clothed in white robes. They have been converted in heart and transformed in life. Palm branches were used to celebrate victory, and that victory is referred to as the *salvation* of God. It is a divine accomplishment brought about by the Sovereign God on the Throne through the agency of His Son. Thus Revelation agrees with the testimony of other Scriptures, which properly label Christ as our Savior (Titus 2:13. Isaiah 43:11; 45:15,21). The credit for this saving turnabout, and the glory from it, is to Father and Son together.

7:11,12 The angelic observers of a salvation they do not know by experience praise God when they heard the thanksgiving and worship of redeemed sinners. We observe that they have seven items in their doxology; it is complete. Why do they praise God for *our* salvation? By it God shows His glorious attributes to the heavenly beings:

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (Ephesians 3:8-10).

7:13-14 An elder addressed John. It is typical of apocalyptic for angels to supply words of interpretation. The question, “*Who are these?*” is designed to make us wait for the answer, which must be important. We already know from v.9 that they are from all the nations, but a new feature is being put before us. They have come out of the great tribulation. They came out of it by death, for in that tribulation their lives were taken from them. In the fifth seal these same saints are shown as those who as victims appeal for justice. Now they are seen as victors. For them the battle is over. In Jewish ritual, after warfare victors wash blood *off* their clothes before they could enter the community again. These saints in Revelation 7 do the opposite; they make their clothes clean by washing them *in* blood, the blood of the Lamb. This is an early indicator of how close their bloodshed, occurring in the great tribulation, is linked to the blood of Christ. This multitude was also sealed, but they still died from hostile hands. Christians are protected from the wrath of God, but on earth for now we are not immune to the hatred and oppression of the enemy.

7:15-17 They are before the throne without fear. In the sixth seal sinners are terrified. They can be before the heavenly throne of God as those who belong there. In due course, God will walk with man on earth in the holy city (21:3). The Father shelters them, and the Lamb shepherds them, showing the complete likeness in the Lord’s care of His own. The martyrs’ experience on earth was traumatic but brief. In the end of Revelation 7, it is over eternally, and no trial of any kind can ever come upon them again. With this vision the Lord encourages His people. Our privilege to suffer for Christ is limited to this life; it should not be wasted.

Note that the Lamb is in *the midst of the throne*. Revelation is abundantly clear on the true and full deity of Christ. There is no such thing anyway as partial deity. The LORD is our shelter and shade (Isaiah 25:1-5). That shelter is Christ (Isaiah 32:1,2). He is in the midst of the throne, because that throne is the throne of God and of the Lamb (22:1).

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PLEASE NOTE: I have not said anything in these notes about the order of the tribes, the omission of **Dan**\*, the oddity of Joseph and Manasseh, rather than Manasseh and Ephraim, etc. Dr. Dennis Johnson in our text has adopted the hypothesis of another scholar. That interpretation is appealing and even quite convincing. It has not been out long (c. 20 years) to see how it survives the scrutiny of those not convinced by it, and I do not have access in Las Cruces to a large theological library, so that I can read the critiques that already exist. I leave you with what Johnson has given us. In my final version of these notes I will need to add something about this subject. For now it can wait. \*[**Dan** is omitted in Revelation 7, included in 1Chronicles 2:2, and then omitted in the listing which follows immediately (1 Chronicles 2:3 – 8:40). In chapter 12, Dan reappears again. This is not easy to handle.] *DHL*