



Part 17 – The Church at War

Revelation 7:1-8

Chapter seven of the Book of Revelation is a theological interlude between the opening of the sixth and seventh seal. It is the answer to the question “Who can stand?” (6:17). Who will endure through the great judgments of God in the final days of this present evil age? The question is answered in John’s description of the church in symbolic and redemptive historical categories. First John *hears* the church described as inhabitants of a hostile world (vv. 1-8). It is a description of the church militant, the church at war. The roll call of the 144,000 is highly symbolic and recalls the assembling of the 12 tribes of Israel for battle. The arrangement of the 12 tribes is unique from any other accounting in Scripture and is meant to point beyond ethnic Israel to the multinational church of Jesus Christ. It is the vast company of God’s redeemed, all of whom have been sealed by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13-14). Secondly, John is then allowed to see them and what he beholds is not simply 144,000 men but the great multitude of the church in final victory, at peace in the presence of the Lord (7:9-17). The war is over. Sin, death and the devil have been cast away forever. “The great church victorious shall be the church at rest.”

What Is The Seal?

Vs. 1 – John’s opening, “After this,” is not a chronological reference. Rather, John is simply stating that after he saw what he described in chapter six, he now sees something new which, as it turns out, is an answer to the question “Who can stand?” (6:17). “The four corners of the earth,” is a colloquialism meant to indicate the earth in its totality. That the angels take their position at the four corners means that God has granted them great power over the earth as agents of his justice. “The four winds of the earth” should be understood as referring to the four horsemen of 6:1-8, “which were closely modeled on the horsemen of Zechariah 6:1-8 because the latter are also identified in Zechariah 6:5 as ‘the four winds of heaven.’”¹

Vv. 2-3 – What is described here happens prior to the breaking of the sixth seal which depicts the destruction of the fallen creation (6:12-17). The four angels are granted power to temporarily restrain the full judgment of the Lord upon the earth until God’s people have been “sealed.” The holy angels are granted authority to place God’s seal upon his people. Though some understand this “seal” as referring to God’s protection of his people from physical harm, that seems unlikely at best. “The picture of the seal here is the same as what was seen by Ezekiel when the Lord commands the angel to put a mark on the foreheads of those who hate sin before he strikes the city in judgment (Ezekiel 9:4-6).”² This seal upon believers indicates spiritual protection. In this present age, believers are subject to the same sorts of sorrows and sufferings as unbelievers. But God keeps and preserves his people through it all, even taking them safely through death in order to present them to himself holy and complete.

In addition, the seal is a sign of authentication and ownership. The seal is symbolic of the Holy Spirit who is the eternal seal of the Lord’s own salvation for every believer (Ephesians 1:13-14). God’s people will not be secretly snatched out of this world and its troubles. Rather, by the sealing of the Holy Spirit they will be granted endurance to take their stand for Christ through this present evil age. It is a picture of salvation.

Who Are The 144,000?

Vs. 4 – “And I heard the number of the sealed...” – Notice how John does not see the 144,000 but, rather, *hears* their description in the form of a roll call of Israelite tribes. Later, beginning in verse nine, he will see what the Lord has described, which is literally a vast multitude of all the redeemed from every nation.

The “number of the sealed” is highly symbolic and has deep redemptive historical significance given the connection between the church and old covenant Israel. There are striking similarities with Ezekiel chapter nine in which the prophet hears in a vision the Lord say, “Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in [Jerusalem].” The mark would protect them from the judgment that was about to befall the city as the Passover blood on the doorpost protected the Israelites from the Lord’s judgment on the night of the exodus from Egypt. This protection is to be understood spiritually because in this present sinful age, believers suffer

¹ Greg Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015) p. 143

² Beale, p. 144

the sorts of sorrows and calamities which are common to all mankind. But through it all the Lord preserves their souls and grants them endurance to remain faithful.³

Vv.5-8 – Throughout the Bible numbers are often used symbolically. This is never more true than in the Books of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation. The number twelve has great significance in the Bible as it is the number of the tribes of Israel and the apostles. The number of those sealed here is to be taken symbolically, indicating completion: 12x12x1000. There is a direct parallel between the 144,000 in chapter seven and the 144,000 mentioned in 14:1-4 as those “redeemed from the earth.” They represent the full number of God’s people. “The 144,000 in 14:3 are not some small remnant of ethnic Israelites but another way of speaking of the larger remnant of humanity living during the church age whom Christ has redeemed from throughout the world.”⁴

The roll call of the twelve tribes is to be taken in a military sense.⁵ Chief among the evidence for this is the use of the clause “from the tribe of” which ties it to Numbers 1:21, 23, etc. in which the tribes are being numbered for battle against the Canaanites.

The list of Israel’s twelve tribes, as given here, is unlike any other accounting of the tribes elsewhere in the Bible. This is the only time Judah is named first. Joseph is mentioned and one of his sons, Manasseh, but not the other, Ephraim. That means, in effect, that Manasseh is mentioned twice. Dan is omitted as well. The roll of tribes here is meant to be understood symbolically, not as national Israel but its spiritual counterpart, the church of Jesus, believing Jews and Gentiles together. This is common in the New Testament. Paul refers to Christians as “the circumcision,” and “the Israel of God” (Philippians 3:3; Galatians 6:16). Of the church, he writes, “If you are Christ’s, you are Abraham’s offspring” (Galatians 3:29). All that was promised to and pre-figured in Israel is brought to full completion in the church.

What John hears in the roll call of the 144,000 is a description of the church fit for spiritual war. It is the church in every generation in this present age. And until we are finally the church victorious, we will be the church at war.

Be a good soldier.

- Proper Training – The apostle Paul compared the Christian life to both warfare and athletic competitions. In both cases, the necessity of training is emphasized. And Paul never speaks of this training as belonging to only the early days of his walk with Christ. Rather, the Christian never grows beyond his need for training (1 Corinthians 9:26-27; 1 Timothy 4:6-8).
- Proper Focus – The good soldier occupies himself with those matters that are connected to his mission (2 Timothy 2:3-4).
- Proper Armaments – In Ephesians 6 Paul tells us to put on the full armor of God. You don’t enter a battle dressed for a pleasure cruise. You have to ditch the cabana wear in favor of body armor. Drop the pina colada and take up the sword. Since our warfare is spiritual then our weapons are spiritual as well. We go to battle in prayer. We wield the sword of God’s Word against the pretentious lies of the age. We are strengthened for battle by the ordinary means of grace. We return evil with good, respond to hatred with love, and answer persecution with prayer. We stand firm against temptation and endure the flaming arrows of the wicked one.

Never go into battle alone.

Just as soldiers in a war need their fellow soldiers, so Christians need the company of the redeemed in this life. Make Christian fellowship a priority. Some professing Christians say that they do not much care for other Christians; that they would much rather spend time with unbelievers. How can that be? How can you have greater rapport with and fondness for people who do not love what you say you love? When do you not treasure what you say you treasure? We must continue “to meet together...encouraging one another, and all the more as [we] see the Day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:25).

³ Grant Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001) p. 302

⁴ Beale, p. 147

⁵ Richard Baukham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1993) 217-229