



## Part 18 – The Church at Rest

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### Revelation 7:9-8:1

The opening of the sixth seal commences the final judgment and the destruction of the present fallen world. But before the opening of the seventh seal there is a dramatic pause while the redeemed of God are assured of the Lord's protection even as they endure calamities. They are sealed from spiritual harm which harkens back to the same protection God gave his people in **Ezekiel 9**. "The innumerable assembly of nations shows the victorious church in heaven, emerging triumphant from tribulation not through a painless rapture but through a faithful death (**Revelation 12:11**)."<sup>1</sup>

The precise numbering in the first half of chapter seven communicates God's knowledge of and care for each one of his redeemed. He has numbered his people with great care and will not lose a single one of them. The vast multitude seen by John depicts the church in all her breadth brought safely home. The white robes and exuberant praise described by John are meant to comfort the church who, in every generation, makes its way through times of great tribulation.

### Who is the "great multitude"?

**Vs. 9** – "After this I looked, and behold, 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..." Here, we are still being told "Who can stand?" through the judgment of the Lord (6:17). Having heard the Lord describe the company of the redeemed as 144,000 men assembled for battle from the tribes of Israel, John now opens his eyes and sees who these people are. And what he sees is not 144,000 Jewish males but "a great multitude" beyond numbering, made up of people from every nation on earth. "The Israel of God" (**Galatians 6:16**) is not ethnic Israel but Jew and Gentile alike who, like Abraham, have trusted in the Lord's promise to save through his Christ.

The Lord's description is meant to capture the church's reality in this present age, the church at war. But what John sees is the church at rest in the presence of God, clothed in white, palm branches in hand. Written originally to churches consisting primarily of Gentile Christians, the 144,000 Jewish males described by the Lord is certainly symbolic in nature. As Michael Wilcock helpfully observes:

"This is in line with the regular New Testament teaching which applies to the Christian church the titles and privileges of Israel. If our numbers are specified even more closely, and oddly, in that each of the twelve tribes, whether large or small, contributes just 12,000; and if the tribes are listed in an order found nowhere else in the Bible; and if one of them (Dan) is omitted altogether, and the lack made up by including one of Joseph's sons as well as Joseph himself; then the description of us is very stylized indeed. But it is the kind of description we should expect if this is a 'diagram' of the church...What John heard was God's declaration of their total, given symbolically as '144,000'. What he saw, on the other hand, was that this definite total, known to God, is from the human point of view a numberless multitude."<sup>2</sup>

**Vv. 13-14** – The elder's question (vs. 13) is rhetorical. He means for John to know precisely who this vast multitude is. Notice how the elder describes them. They are clothed in robes made white because they have been washed "in the blood of the Lamb." This is symbolic language depicting salvation. The filth of their sin has been washed away entirely by the dying of Christ. This is a description of every sinner who believes throughout all the ages.

Typical of apocalyptic literature, the imagery moves back and forth across the page and particular symbolic representations come and go. The 144,000 Israelite men assembled for war are the very same vast multinational company of the redeemed that John sees. The church militant in this present age will become the church victorious who, having come out of its years of tribulation, will be at rest in the presence of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001) p. 134

<sup>2</sup> Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1975) pp. 80, 81

**What is “the great tribulation”?**

**Vs. 14** – “Great tribulation” likely refers to the entire church age, given that the church has been in tribulation since her inception. It may possibly refer to the final days of judgment depicted in the breaking of the sixth and seventh seals of the Lord’s judgment. In either case, the church has not been snatched out of the world prior to those days of tribulation. In his message to the church in Smyrna Jesus said, “I know your tribulation” (**Revelation 2:9-10**). Jesus warned his followers that they would face tribulation (**John 16:33**). Luke summarized the Apostle Paul’s preaching: “Through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God” (**Acts 14:22**). John introduces himself to the churches in Asia Minor as their “partner in tribulation” (**Revelation 1:9**).

“We conclude that the sign of tribulation is not restricted to the end of time but characterizes the entire age between Christ’s two comings. Because of the continued opposition of the world to the kingdom of God, Christians must expect to suffer tribulation and persecution of one kind or another during this entire age.”<sup>3</sup>

On the basis of Jesus’ words in **Matthew 24** however, it may be that a final climactic tribulation will occur in the days immediately prior to Christ’s return. If this is true then this particular time of tribulation will not be different in kind from earlier tribulations, but rather an intensification in degree. In either case, the taking up of the church and the return of Jesus will be the same event, not two events separated by seven years.

**Vs. 8:1** – The breaking of the seventh seal describes creation’s silent awe as the Lord arrives in final judgment. For the enemies of God, it is the silence of dread. But for the church it is the silence of unspeakable relief and joy.<sup>4</sup>

**How do we stand?**

Revelation chapter seven is in part an answer to the question “Who can stand?” (6:17). The answer is the vast multitude of God’s redeemed. But how does this come about considering the tribulation through which we must pass? The following are promises that will be experienced in part in this life but in their eternal fullness in the age to come.

**• God’s Protection**

**Vs. 15** – The word translated “shelter” is the equivalent of the Hebrew word for tabernacle. It’s the same word used in **John 1:14**: “The word became flesh and made His *dwelling* tabernacle among us.” This was prefigured in Leviticus, God in the midst. “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty” (**Psalms 91:1**). We experience God’s spiritual protection as we walk through this world which is currently in the midst of tribulation. Ultimately God’s protection will be comprehensive and eternal as everything corrupt and sinful and destructive will be removed forever.

**• God’s Provision**

**Vs. 16** – For God’s people there will be no more hunger or thirst. There will be no more sickness or sorrow. Never again will they hunger. Never again will they thirst. No more scorching heat. God will provide for his church, the church at rest, a blessed life with all we need or could even imagine. How can we quantify the blessings of a sinless age? How can we properly appreciate the idea of a world without sin, decay, or death? But this is the world that we were created for. And it is the world that is the true home of all God’s redeemed.

**• God’s Presence**

**Vs. 17** – In a striking mixing of metaphors (not unusual in apocalyptic literature), the Lamb is now the great Shepherd! These last two verses are, likewise, differently understood. The blessing described could refer to the intermediate state – that is the time between a believer’s death and the Second Coming of Christ. It is that period of time when we will be with the Lord but not yet in our resurrected and glorified bodies in the new creation. Or this may be a reference to life in the new creation as John sees it in the final two chapters of Revelation. The references to the great multitude in verse nine and to the great tribulation seem to favor the latter interpretation. This is the entire church in heaven at the end of this present age; the church triumphant and at rest.

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Dennis Johnson, p. 136