

## *Trouble and Hope*

### **Revelation 7**

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We're in the interlude between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals on the scroll that contains God's purpose for creation and plan to redeem it. As the Lamb (Jesus) breaks each seal, John sees a symbol of the opposition God's people face and of God's judgment.

The principal purpose of the visions in Revelation 6 is to awaken a sense of uneasiness in readers by vividly identifying threats to their well-being. The four horsemen are designed to shatter the illusion that people can find true security in the borders of a nation or empire, in a flourishing economy, or in their own health. Subsequent visions promise that God will not allow injustice to continue forever—which is assuring to the victims, but disturbing to the perpetrators—and warn that no place on earth and no position of power or wealth will protect people from the judgment of God and the Lamb. Those who grasp the way that these visions relentlessly undercut human pretensions will find themselves asking the final question in the chapter: "Who is able to stand?" (6:17). Those who have been moved to ask this question are rightly prepared for the visions to follow in chapter 7. (Craig Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* 81-82)

Let's look at this chapter and see who stands before the throne of God and the Lamb of God.

First, John sees four angels standing at the four corners of the earth. They're holding back the four winds of judgment from blowing on land or sea or trees. There's a holy restraint, a divine limit, placed on the terrors of judgment and destruction.

Then another angel comes up. This one carries the seal of the living God. A king's signet ring bore his seal or mark. It made an imprint in wax to seal official documents or to mark something as belonging to the king. God's people are to be sealed or marked as belonging to God, precious to

God, and protected by God. In 14:1 the seal is the name of the Lamb and of his Father placed on the foreheads of people.

Why is the seal placed on the foreheads of God's people? The forehead represents the capacity to perceive, to think, to remember, to imagine, to decide. What we do starts with our thoughts. Who we are is shaped by how we think. So the seal on the forehead represents our lives being transformed by the Holy Spirit in renewing our minds. The Lord enables us to think his way. Through our thoughts, the Spirit is transforming us into the likeness of Jesus (see Robert Mulholland, *Revelation: Journey Through the Bible*, Vol. 16, p. 45).

In his vision, John *hears* the number of people who were sealed: 144,000. What does that mean? Revelation, like other apocalyptic literature, uses numbers symbolically. Here, the number twelve is multiplied by itself. Twelve represents the people of God and completeness, so 12 x 12 is totally complete. Then 144 is multiplied by 1000—another number that signifies fullness and completeness. So the 144,000 represent the full number of the people of God. They're all of God's people from the Old and New Covenants. They're sealed, showing that they belong to God and God protects them. This is not necessarily physical protection. Many of God's people have given up their lives for the gospel, and many more probably will. But we're protected spiritually and ultimately. God keeps us as we worship God only.

Understanding this part of the vision is complicated by the fact that the 144,000 are said to come from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. But the tribes are listed to show that it's the people of God who are in view. All of God's faithful are included. There are some interesting features of this list. Judah is listed first instead of Reuben who was Jacob's (Israel's) firstborn son. That's because Jesus the Messiah came from the tribe of Judah. Both Manasseh and Joseph are listed. That's unusual because Joseph was Manasseh's father. But another tribe needed to be listed to replace Dan, who was omitted. Since the Second Century, Christian commentators have said that Dan was left out of this list because that tribe was so often associated with idolatry. Also, there was a tradition that the antichrist would come from the tribe of Dan.

Now John moves from hearing about this great number of people to *seeing* them (verse 9). In this chapter we see two different images for the same reality. John hears about an assembly of 144,000, but when he looks he sees a great multitude that no one can count. It's like in chapter 5 when he heard about the Lion of the Tribe of Judah but looked and saw a Lamb that had been slain. That was looking at Jesus from two different perspectives. These pictures of the 144,000 and the great multitude look at Christ's followers from two different perspectives.

John looks and sees this great multitude that no one could count. They come from every nation, tribe, people, and language. *They stand* before the throne and the Lamb. There's a similar vision in chapters four and five. God's family, God's community, includes people from all over creation—every race, every tribe, every kind of people. All of us will live together in the new creation God will make. We better start getting used to each other now if we're going to spend eternity together. One reason we need to learn to forgive now is that we'll be together in eternity (Miraslov Volf, "Love Your Heavenly Enemy," *Christianity Today*, Oct 23, 2000, pp. 94-97).

If you're a Christian you're part of this great assembly at the throne of God, with Jesus the Lamb. John saw us there in his vision. And the only way we can stand there, the only reason we can be there, is that salvation belongs to our God who rules and to the Lamb, and because we have washed our robes in the blood of the Lamb and made them white.

White robes symbolize purity, being clean, righteousness. Our lives are purified and we're made right because of what Jesus did when he died for us. When we trust in Christ, we're washed, forgiven, made right with God. Later, the white robes, also called fine linen, are said to be the righteous acts of God's people (19:8). We're able to stand before God now and forever covered in the righteousness of Jesus, but also having the righteousness that the Holy Spirit has worked into us. The righteousness of Jesus rubs off on us and into us and we're on our way to being actually righteous by God's grace.

The palm branches represent praise. The great scene of worship that we saw in chapters four and five is repeated and echoed here. We worship

God along with all creation and all the angels. Here are seven expressions of praise surrounded by "Amen," so be it, it is so, yes! Praise, glory, wisdom, thanks, honor, power, and strength belong to God for ever and ever.

While John is caught up observing this praise and worship, one of the elders asks him, "Who are these dressed in white and where did they come from?" John replies, "Sir, you know. Won't you tell me?"

And the elder answers, "These are the ones who came out of [or through] the great tribulation." The phrase *great tribulation* is understood in various ways. When I was first learning about Christ's Second Coming and the End Times, I learned the view that says the church will be raptured out of the world before the great tribulation. But then in a Bible study on Revelation, I discovered this passage about the huge crowd from every nation, tribe, people, and language that comes through the great tribulation and I began to wonder if what I had been learning was right. This seemed to say that all of God's people come through the tribulation.

I was also influenced around that time by hearing about Corrie ten Boom who was visiting a place where Christians had been harshly persecuted. They were suffering for their faith and many had been killed. She said they were going through the tribulation. Someone replied, "But it's not the *great* tribulation." Corrie said, "Try telling them that."

Christians have always suffered for the faith at various times and places. There are Christians today who suffer oppression, imprisonment, or death for their witness to the faith. Are we going to tell them that they're not going through the tribulation? How would the teaching that God will get the church out of danger sound to those brothers and sisters? I heard other influential Christians talk about the church remaining through the tribulation, staying until the return of Jesus. And I began moving toward that view.

Studying the doctrine of last things in a college class reinforced this understanding. I don't believe the Bible teaches that there will be a secret rapture of the church at some point prior to the Second Coming. I believe the church endures tribulation all through the time between Christ's first and second appearances. It may be more intense in some times and places. And it may intensify greatly and become more widespread as the end

approaches. But we're sealed with the name of God and of the Lamb. If we keep trusting our Lord and don't give in and serve God's enemies, we'll be kept, we'll endure and come through all tribulation into the glory of heaven and ultimately the new heaven and new earth.

All of heaven joins in the glad and passionate adoration of our Lord, who has effected such a salvation (vv 11-14). God is worshiped as the One who has loved His people well through the entirety of "tribulation." Not just the final outburst of suffering of the people of God; rather, the totality of pain, suffering, persecution, and sorrow that we know in this fallen, God-hating world. There was great tribulation for the first-century Christians, just as there has been in every century since. (Scotty Smith, *Unveiled Hope* 118)

Washed in Jesus' blood, cleansed and transformed by God's grace, we stand before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple. But we're not like the old priests and Levites. We all have direct access to God. We don't offer sacrifices to get to God; we praise and adore God who made the great sacrifice that brings us to God, that shows we have God's favor and welcome.

The throne of God is mentioned repeatedly in Revelation. God rules. And we share in God's rule. Heaven, the new creation, isn't a dull, boring place where we do nothing. We serve God, we worship God. We're caught up in adoring God. The purpose we were made for is fulfilled.

God who rules will live among us and shelter us. We dwell in God's tabernacle. It's a place where we really belong, where we're ultimately secure—delivered and protected from all evil.

Claim this promise for your loved ones who've gone to be with the Lord and for yourself when we're all finally together in our Father's house: "Never again will they hunger, never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. 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 sacrificial love of God in Jesus Christ rules the universe. Jesus is the Lion who is the Lamb who is our Shepherd. He's the Good Shepherd, bringing us close to God. He's the Lord our Shepherd who leads us, provides for us, protects us, and gives us a place in God's house forever. He leads us now and will lead us forever to the water of life, the fountain of real living, the source of God's kind of life.

And God himself will wipe away all our tears. When you think of God, think of one who cares enough to get that close, to share our sorrows, and to take them away. The sorrows of this life will be done and we will live with joy in God's presence forever.

Have you been cleansed by God's grace in the sacrifice of Jesus? Are you forgiven? Do you stand in God's presence, confident and assured that God accepts you? Are you being transformed by God's Spirit into someone who can live in God's direct presence? Do you want to be part of the great uncountable crowd rejoicing in God's presence? Come to him now. Tell him that's what you want. Commit yourself to be a follower of Jesus, the Great Shepherd of the Sheep.