

Sealed Now and Praising Then

Revelation 7

Turn to Ezekiel 9. Do you wonder if your faith in Christ would last, if life got bad enough? If persecution got bad enough? Do you worry that you might decide that following Christ was not worth it, and you would fall away? I have had unhappy worries about this.

Paul said, at the end of his life, "I kept the faith." He sounds pleased with himself, relieved. "I kept the faith." 1 Tim 4. Did Paul really wonder if he would keep the faith? Sounds like it. Well, if Paul wondered about this, is there any hope for me?

Jesus said: "The one who endures to the end will be saved." It does not sound easy to be saved, does it. Sometimes Jesus did make it sound easy. "Come to me, all you who labour and are burdened, and I will give you rest." Doesn't sound hard. But usually he did not make it easy.

Rev 6 ends with a question: "who can stand?" Rebellious humanity has arrived at the last judgement. Or perhaps I should say that final judgement arrived on rebellious people. They are facing the wrath of the One on the Throne and of the Lamb, and they would rather the rocks and mountains fell on them. Their last words are: "and who can stand?"

Psalm 1: *The wicked will not stand in the judgement, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but way of the wicked leads to destruction.* The wicked will not stand in the judgement, but the righteous will be fine, because God watches over them.

Revelation 7 answers the question: who can stand? Who's faith will last? Who is going to endure to the end and be saved?

And the answer is that God has sealed his servants, he has put his own name on our foreheads, and the name of the Lamb. He did this before the trouble began, to mark us as his own. In Rev 14:1 the 144,000 have the Lamb's **name** and God's **name** written their foreheads, in Rev 7 they have a **seal** on their foreheads, so we assume **name** and the **seal** are the same thing.

**The Protecting Mark on the Forehead in Ezekiel 9.** John in Revelation gets the protecting mark from Ezekiel 9, so we will read that together. (Ez. 9:3-6)

*The glory of the God of Israel went up from above the cherubim, where it had been, and moved to the threshold of the temple. Then the Lord called to the man clothed in linen who had the writing kit at his side and said to him, "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 it."*

*As I listened, he said to the others, “Follow him through the city and kill, without showing pity or compassion. Slaughter the old men, the young men and women, the mothers and children, but do not touch anyone who has the mark.*

God was judging the people of Jerusalem. Who was saved? The people who were discouraged by the sin in Jerusalem, that is, all the righteous in Jerusalem. God put a mark on the forehead of all those who loved his ways, and they were safe from severe judgement.

### **Symbolic and Literal Meaning in Revelation**

Some Christians believe that in Revelation, if it is possible to take anything as literally true, then that’s what Revelation means. If literal truth does not make any sense, then symbolic meaning is okay. But whenever we can, we should take it as meaning what it says. So, if it says 144,000 Israelites, 12,000 from each tribe, then we should take that as literally true.

And going along with this, if we take it symbolically when we don’t have to then we are saying God does not really mean what he says. If we **don’t** take as much to be literally true as we can, then God does not really mean what he says in the Bible. So, if I teach that 144,000 Israelites are a picture of the whole church, then I don’t think God means what he says in the Bible.

First of all, God always means what he says in the Bible. Let there be no doubt about that. But in Revelation, “literally true unless that’s impossible” is not a good method. Revelation is obviously very happy to use symbols; so why should we avoid symbolic meaning? What’s more, who are we to decide what is possible?

So, how DO we decide what has symbolic meaning and what is concretely and literally true? We shall read the OT carefully, and see how these symbols were used in the OT. We will read the rest of the NT carefully, too. Revelation will agree with the rest of the NT.

And, we will read Revelation itself carefully. If we read all of Revelation carefully, it tells us how to take its images. Today I will take the 144,000 symbolically, although some take it this as literally true. It seems to me Revelation itself tells us that this is a heavenly symbolic picture.

### **The Four Winds are the Four Horses: Sealed before Trouble Begins. 7:1-3**

*After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. <sup>2</sup> Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: <sup>3</sup> “Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.”*

In Zechariah 6, the four coloured horses and the four winds are the same thing. So if we are sealed *before* the four destructive **winds** blow, that's the same as sealed *before* the four destructive **horsemen** of Rev 6 ride out to the earth.

This means that this sealing in Rev 7:1-4 happened right at the beginning of Rev 6, before any of the horses rode out. Since the four winds and the four horses are the same, the sealing happens after Jesus took the scroll but before he opened any of the seals.

What is the seal that's put on our foreheads? In Rev 14, it says that the 144,000 have the name of God and the Lamb written on their foreheads. In Ephesians 1:13 and 4:30, the Holy Spirit is the seal that keeps us for our future redemption. I would like to bring Paul and John together. 2 Cor 4 says Christ writes on us, and the *ink* is the Holy Spirit.

So, in my imagination, I understand it this way: God writes his name and the Lamb's name on our foreheads, and the Holy Spirit is the *ink* that he uses to write with. In that way, God's name can be the seal, and the Holy Spirit can also be the seal. I don't know if this is true in the way I'm saying that, probably not. BUT, the truth of the matter will be something pretty close to that.

### **The 144,000 – God's People Counted as they Go into Battle. 7:4-8.**

*7:4 - Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.*

In the OT, when they took a census, it was usually of the fighting men. They counted all the men who could go to battle. They did not count women, because in those days women were not soldiers. So the counting here means that all believers, men and women and Jews and Gentiles, are lined up as God's army, prepared for holy war.

Why do I think that the 144,000 are all believers, and not actually Israelites, 12,000 from each tribe? I sent out two pages during the week explaining this. I will go over that a little bit here.

1, The words that describe the 144,000 are used in other places to describe all believers. In 7:3, they are "*servants*" of God, and they are "*sealed*" on their "*foreheads*." In Revelation, all believers are servants of God, and all of us have God's name written on our foreheads (22:4). In Ezekiel 9:4, all the righteous are marked on their foreheads.

Rev 14 says these 144,000 are "*purchased*" from the earth (14:3,4). In Rev 5:9, all believers are purchased. In 14:3, the 144,000 "*follow*" the Lamb. All believers are followers of the Lamb. In 14:3, the 144,000 are "*firstfruits*," a word used in James 1:18, where all believers are firstfruits.

"Servants" "sealed" on their "foreheads," "purchased" "followers" are "firstfruits" = all of us.

2, Revelation, as Paul, changes the meaning of “Jew.” Revelation 2:9 – *I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.* 3:9 – *Those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars.*

These are ethnic, circumcised Jews, **but are not Jews at all** as far as John (who is a Jew, an Israelite) is concerned, because they reject Christ. So who IS a Jew, a true Israelite, in Rev?

Answer: Revelation agrees with Paul (Romans 2), true believers including Gentiles are the real “Jews”: *A person is a Jew [and an Israelite] who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.* Revelation agrees.

3, Let’s talk about the #12. There is one important 12 in the OT: the 12 tribes of Israel; and one important 12 in the NT: the 12 disciples of the Lord. These both suggest that the number “12” symbolizes the people of God. Revelation brings believing Israelites in the OT and believing Gentiles in the NT together into one true people of God.

So Revelation likes to put two “12s” together. In Rev 4, we have 24 elders, 12 + 12. The wall of the New Jerusalem is 144 cubits high, 12 x 12. The New Jerusalem has 12 gates which are the twelve sons of Israel, and also 12 foundations which are the 12 apostles of the Lamb.

So 12 tribes of 12,000 in each tribe fits with these other 12s nicely, 12 x 12,000 = 144,000, Jews and Gentiles who follow the Lamb. 144,000 Israelites is a heavenly picture of all believers lined up as a holy army.

**First John heard, now John sees.** 7:9 *After these things I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.*

Sometimes in Revelation John **hears** something, and then he turns to **see** what he heard. It **looks** different than what he **heard**, but is actually the same thing. The best example in Rev 5, where one of the 24 elders **tells** John that the lion of Judah conquered, and can take the scroll, which John **hears**, but when John turns to **look**, he **sees** a slaughtered lamb that’s alive.

But they are both our Lord, the lion of Judah that conquered and the slaughtered lamb that lives are both the Lord. So here, in Rev 7:4, John **hears** a **number** of those sealed: 144,000 Israelites with 12,000 from each tribe. But when he **looks**, he **sees** a crowd from every nation and language and people, a crowd which it is **impossible to number**.

They are as deliberately opposite as the conquering lion and the slaughtered lamb. And just as the lion and the lamb both describe our Lord, so the 144,000 **Israelites** and the crowd that can’t be numbered from **every nation** both describe the people of God.

7:9 begins, “after these things I looked.” We have a big time spread here. The sealing took place at the start, before any of the winds were released.

But 7:9-17 takes us to the future, the new heaven and earth. It says in 7:15 that God “tabernacles” over his people, “dwells” over them; in 21:3, new heaven and new earth, God “tabernacles” with them, “dwells” with them, same word in Rev 21 as in Rev 7. Also in 7:17, God wipes away every tear from their eyes, and it says the very same in 21:4 on the new earth.

The point of Revelation 7 is this: **The people God sealed at the start are the ones dwelling with him at the End.** The reason we are dwelling with God at the End is that he sealed us at the start, wrote his name and the Lamb’s name on our foreheads at the start.

He counted us all at the start, lined us all up for holy war at the start, and we will all be there at the End, because he sealed us to keep us for himself. Rev 6 ends: who can stand? Who will endure to the end? Only the very tough? Only the really strong? No, only the ones he seals! And John’s 7 first century churches badly need to hear this kind of encouragement. As do we.

This is the third time Revelation has taken us to the End. At the end of Rev 5, every creature in all creation was praising God and the Lamb. That’s the End, in the new heaven and earth.

At the end of Rev 6, the 6<sup>th</sup> seal took us to final judgement, the final Day of the Lord, the day of God’s wrath, which happens at the End of human history just before the new heaven and earth.

And in the second half of Rev 7 also takes us to the End, the new heaven and earth.

**They cry out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God.”** 7:10 - *And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”*

We will all be in this crowd. If you could imagine a photograph of that very crowd, in enough definition that one could focus in on individual faces, you and I would be in this crowd.

The believers in those 7 churches in Asia are in this great crowd, John the writer is there, and believers who are alive when the Lord returns, all in this crowd.

“Salvation belongs to our God.” In other words, God sealed us and that’s how we got here. His sealing worked. “God, credit for saving us belongs to you, honour for saving us belongs to you, the power to save us belongs to you, glory and worship for saving us belongs to you, praise and thanks for saving us belongs to you. Thank you for sealing us; salvation belongs to you.”

Who will stand in the judgement? The sealed ones. Who will endure to the end? Sealed ones.

**Who are they? They came out of the great trouble.** 7:13-15 *Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?” I answered, “Sir, you know.” And he said, “These are they who have come out of **the great trouble**; they have 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 shelter them with his presence.*

This “great trouble” gets translated “great tribulation,” but it is the common Greek word for “trouble.” It is used 5x in Revelation, the other 4 in Rev 1-2. Used 40 or 50 times in the NT.

In Revelation, troubles for God’s people will be increasingly severe at the end of time, but the great trouble already had begun at the time Rev is written. It does not begin at some future time.

Rev 1:9, “I, John, your brother in the **trouble** and kingdom and endurance that are in Jesus.” John took his exile as part of the great trouble. Antipas in Pergamum was martyred = the trouble.

### **The Lamb will be our Shepherd 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 shelter them (tabernacle over them, dwell over them) with his presence. <sup>16</sup> ‘Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,’ nor any scorching heat. <sup>17</sup> 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.’”*

God is very determined to keep us for this day. It will take endurance and faithfulness on our part to keep the faith until the End. But when we get there, we will know that it was the Lord who kept us, who sealed us. We will praise God for keeping us, because we’ll know then that without his keeping, we’d not be there at all, none of us. Amen.

*[Prayer] God, who rules for ever and ever: credit for saving us belongs to you, honour for saving us belongs to you, the power to save us belongs to you, glory and worship for saving us belongs to you, praise and thanks for saving us belongs to you. Thank you for sealing us, writing your name on us. Salvation belongs to you. Amen.*