

“Secure and Satisfied”

Revelation 7

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The Bible teaches us there is a beginning and an ending to history.

It speaks of God creating the world and it speaks of God ending the world as we know it.

The major time periods between the beginning and the ending may be described this way:

Old Testament - Cross - Now - Tribulation – Second coming - Millennium - Eternity

After describing the “Now” period of time with the symbolic four horses, the Apostle John, as we saw last week, gave us a preview of that time to come:

Revelation 6:12-17 read:

"I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth... The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then... the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the lamb. For the great day of their wrath has come and who can stand?"

That last question forms the reason for next chapter - chapter 7.

In such a time of destruction “Who can stand?” “Who can survive it?”

The symbolic language of 6:12-17 describes a time that is yet to come when God will shake this world in judgment.

In the text we just read it is called “the great day of God’s wrath”.

In chapter 7 it is called the great tribulation.

Down through the centuries prophets of God have predicted this time to come when God would pour his wrath out on this world.

600 years before Jesus came to earth, Daniel prophesied of this coming tribulation - a time of great stress and desolation on the earth.

Here’s the way Jesus spoke of it when he was here:

Mark 13:14-25

"When you see `the abomination that causes desolation' standing where it does not belong -- let the reader understand -- then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the roof of his house go down or enter the house to take anything out. Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days... Pray that this will not take place in winter,

because those will be days of distress unequalled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now -- and never to be equaled again. If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive...

"But in those days, following that distress,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'

Revelation 8 and following describe something of what that time will be like.

We will look at this more closely after the first of the year when we resume our study of Revelation.

But notice it now briefly.

16:2ff "The first angel went and poured out his bowl on the land and ugly and painful sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast... The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was given power to scorch people with fire. They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God...but they refused to repent... The fifth angel poured out his bowl (and the world) was plunged into darkness. Men gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores but they refused to repent of what they had done..."

Nearly 2/3 of the book of Revelation is a description of that dreadful time of God's wrath just before the coming again of Jesus.

In fact, so intense is this period of destruction, upheaval, and death that Jesus said, as we saw a minute ago, that if that period of time wasn't kept short no one would survive.

But notice that before that time of intense destruction, calamity, and death on the earth is fully described, John, at Jesus instruction, inserts chapter 7 - an interlude.

This is something Jesus wants his people to know before he describes more fully those terrible days to come.

If you were headed into this great tribulation what would you want to know?

If the world is to socially and physically come unraveled in the ways that the Bible describes the tribulation, then how can anyone make it?

Or to again put it in the words of the end of chapter 6:

"The great day of God's wrath has come, and who can stand?"

John will tell us who can stand!

John knew the Christians to whom he was writing were faced daily with living in cities where Christians were unwelcome.

John knew that some generation, maybe his, maybe ours, would live in that great tribulation to come - how could they remain faithful when everything would be falling apart?

For that matter how do people today, even before the great tribulation, remain faithful when their world falls apart?

What about Christians who this very day (Sunday, December 14, 1997) are imprisoned, tortured and will be killed for their faith in Christ in countries like North Korea, China, Algeria, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and other places.

While I have noted some of the more severe forms of one's world falling apart - what about those, some even here, whose worlds are falling apart through illness, disintegrating families, or financial ruin -

how do they make it?

How do they remain faithful to God?

Before Jesus shows John a fuller description of the terrible conditions that will prevail on earth during the great tribulation he gives him two visions that are meant to give God's people great encouragement and confidence:

7:1-8 is the first vision - "After this I saw..."

7:9-17 is the second vision - "After this I looked and there before me was..."

These two visions give us mental pictures of two unshakable truths that God gives his people who face tribulation - either the kind that people face now or the great tribulation to come.

The first vision is of God's protection.

The second vision is of God's paradise.

Before we look at the first vision I need for us to be reminded of the kind of literature we are reading.

It is called apocalyptic literature.

The word "apocalypse" means to reveal, to uncover.

But that kind of literature whether in the Bible or in other secular writings used symbolism to communicate the ideas intended.

The word pictures created would often be exaggerated, even bizarre, collections of creatures and events that together give an impression.

Now what is important to remember about this kind of literature is that we don't take the details in a woodenly literal way but we attempt to understand what the picture is intended to communicate.

Listen to the first vision:

7:1-4 "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. 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: "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." Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel."

We will come back in a minute to who these 144,000 are but for now let's look at what happens.

Four angels are said to have power over a wind that will harm the earth but they are told to wait until a "seal", a mark, is placed on the foreheads of God's people.

What do the angels and wind symbolize?

Other places in Revelation and in other apocalyptic literature, angels are portrayed as being in charge of certain forces of nature - water, fire, wind, etc. Wind in particular is used sometimes in Scripture as symbolic of the judgment of God.

At this point in the book of Revelation it seems quite evident that the symbolism is meant to indicate that the tribulation that is to come on the earth won't come until God has somehow marked those who belong to him.

The vision describes a "seal" or a mark being placed on the foreheads of those who belong to God.

We'll come to this "seal" or mark in a minute but let's go back to who these are who are sealed before the great tribulation begins.

The text says they were "from all the tribes of Israel."

If this was prose literature such as an Old Testament historical book like Exodus we could reasonably assume that the author is referring to the literal descendants of Jacob - the twelve sons of his who became the heads of the 12 families or tribes of Israel - the Jews.

But this is apocalyptic literature, symbolic literature, and so we reasonably ask who is he referring to?

Well he has already told us they are the servants of God.

I will next show you why I believe strongly that these words "tribes of Israel" refer to all God's people who are alive at the time of the great tribulation, not just Jews.

First of all it is common in the NT for the church to be referred to in distinctly OT Jewish terms.

In Galatians 6:16 Paul calls the church, "the Israel of God".

Peter refers to all believers (Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians) as the "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" phrases that are borrowed right out of the OT and applied to the church.

Paul said in Romans that true Jews are those who are Christ followers.

Those and other passages indicate that the church of Jesus Christ, made up of believers of all ethnic backgrounds, is the true Israel.

So here in Revelation 7 it would not be out of character, at all, to use the phrase “tribes of Israel” when referring to the whole church.

Secondly, when we come to Revelation 9 we will see that the wrath of God will fall on all people except those who have the “seal” of God on their foreheads.

Are we to believe that only Jewish Christians will be spared the trouble? Would not the context indicate that all God’s servants are spared?

If the “sealed” ones in chapter 9 are all God’s people then they must be so in chapter 7 as well.

Thirdly, when we come to chapter 14 we find the 144,000 again.

This time they are standing with the Lamb - Christ.

Two things I want you to note about them - they have the name of God written on them and they follow the Lamb where ever he goes.

If you go back to Revelation 2 and 3 when John was writing to all Christians (Jewish and Gentile) in the churches in Turkey he said among other things:

“To him who overcomes I will write on him the name of my God”

It is not only Jewish Christians who are given the name of God but all Christians.

And when we look at chapter 7 and the description of all who stand before the throne of God it specifies that this group includes all tribes, nations, languages - every Christian AND it says, “the Lamb...will be their shepherd.”

This is the same shepherd and same people as the 144,000.

For these reasons it is best to assume that John is using common NT language to describe all the people of God when he says the “tribes of Israel”- the church.

Another question: why the specific reference to 144,000.

I think the best explanation is that the number is meant to indicate completeness and inclusiveness.

The number of tribes (12) is squared and then multiplied by 1000.

The number indicates a large number and a complete number.

The tribes are then mentioned by name (Judah, Reuben, Gad, etc) with 12,000 for each.

But when you notice that not all the tribes are mentioned (Dan is missing), and one tribe is represented twice (Joseph and Manasseh) we have another clue that literalness is not expected here.

Again I believe John is using numbers, symbolically, in a very common biblical way, to convey the idea that all God’s people, every one of them (all Jewish Christians and all Gentile Christians), have been sealed or marked by God.

Now, knowing who is being sealed (all God's servants) and when they are sealed (before the Tribulation comes), we are ready to get the most important matter - what does this sealing mean?

We've already seen this word "seal" used in chapter 6.

And we know that to "seal" something in John's day as in ours usually meant to put a sign of some kind on the item to indicate ownership or security.

A book or letter that was sealed was not to be opened by just anyone.

The seal usually was a mark in wax or ink with a signet ring indicating the authority of the one doing the sealing.

And most importantly the seal indicates to whom the sealed person or thing belongs.

In Revelation 13 we will see that a mark (666) is placed on the forehead or hand of everyone who belongs to the evil one.

This is not the first time in the NT we have heard about this seal on God's people.

2 Corinthians 1:21-22 "Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come."

Ephesians 1:13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit."

When we become a Christian we are given the Holy Spirit of God to live in our spirits - His very presence is God's seal, God's mark, God's guarantee that we belong to God.

The "seal" or the mark is not a literal mark or stamp but is God's Spirit in us.

Jesus promised his disciples, when they were distressed over his talk of his death and the coming difficulty, that the

"The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you...Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

The Holy Spirit's presence is the seal, the guarantee, the assurance that we belong to Christ - even when Jesus is not physically here.

The whole point of the vision is to declare to God's people again that even though they are facing Tribulation, even though it is true that the world will fall apart - they will be protected by God - they belong to him - they have his mark on them.

The sealing of them clearly doesn't mean they will be protected from physical harm, for many if not most of God's people are killed during the great tribulation. (cf 13:15 "as many as should not worship the image of the beast should be killed.")

Christians will still fight the awful battle of death.
 Christians will still experience the ravages of war, civil and international.
 Christians will still suffer from famine in many places in the world.
 And most of all, Christians will suffer for their faith.

BUT they are protected from the eternal consequences that will befall the others.
 These "sealed" ones will come out the other side - victors.

When we read in 9:4 of the trumpet judgments during the Tribulation we see that when the judgments of God begin to fall on people, those with the mark of God are spared.
 God's judgment will not fall on them.

They may suffer persecution, they may suffer indirectly from all that is happening in the Tribulation but they can even pass through the valley of the shadow of death fearing no evil because they belong to God.

And how can they have such confidence that they can go even through Tribulation and not lose their faith?

Because it is God who has promised to see them and us through.

Jesus said, John 10:27-30

"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

Paul wrote, Phil 1:6 "I am confident of this very thing that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

In John 17 Jesus said that he prays for us -and what Jesus prays for, he gets.

Charles Wesley wrote:

"See where before the throne he stands,
 And pours the all-prevailing prayer
 Points to His side, and lifts his hands,
 And shows that I am graven there."

His name is on our foreheads and our names are on his nail pierced hands.
 No matter what the future holds - no matter how dark it gets - if we have God to save us through Jesus, His mark is on us - We belong to God.

We don't always feel that way, but it is true - God has spoken - we belong to him.

Jonathan Shairp captured the contrast between feelings and fact well in these words:

Twixt gleams of joy and clouds of doubt

Our feelings come and go;
 Our best estate is tossed about
 In ceaseless ebb and flow.
 No mood of feeling, form of thought,
 Is constant for a day;
 But Thou O Lord, Thou changest not;
 The same Thou art always.

I grasp Thy strength, make it mine own,
 My heart with peace is blest;
 I lose my hold, and then comes down
 Darkness, and cold unrest.
 Let me no more my comfort draw
 From my frail hold of Thee,
 In this alone rejoice with awe -
 Thy mighty grasp of me.
 John Campbell Shairp in Ferguson

Some believe that Christians won't go through the great Tribulation.
 I disagree.

But whether they do or don't is not the biggest issue.

What we don't want are Christians whose faith can't take tribulation.

We want Christians who are convinced of God's faithfulness so that no matter what comes their way they know they are in God's hands - and he won't fail them.

I go on quickly and briefly to the second vision
 READ 7:9-17.

We will deal with this more fully when we come to chapters 21 and 22.

But notice here that John shows his readers a picture of the paradise of God that is to come.

This time the people of God are described not in OT terms of tribes of Israel but in NT terms of people from every nation, tribe, people and language.

They are standing in front of the throne and in front of the Lamb.

They are in the presence of God, himself and they are worshipping God.

Who are these people?

7:14 "...These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

The very same people who were pictured in the first part of the chapter as anticipating the tribulation are here now pictured after the tribulation.

Before, they were on earth about to head into that terrible time of trouble and John reminds them they are “sealed” by God.
Here they are in God’s presence and the trouble is over.

They are wearing white robes symbolic of purity and holiness, fit for God’s presence.
How did they get white?

They were washed in the blood of Christ.

That is very symbolic language to indicate the forgiveness of sins that comes by grace through faith in Jesus’ death in our place.
He who knew no sin, took our sins on himself and satisfied divine justice by taking our punishment.

And where are they in this vision?

“They are before the throne of God...”

The evil of chapter 6 seemed so dominating.

This world in which we live gives us no cause for hope.

The evil of chapters 8-18 that will come on this earth in unprecedented ways during the tribulation will be nearly overwhelming.

But in the latter part of chapter 7 Jesus gives John a look into eternity - a peek into the future.

This world and the Tribulation are not the end of the story.

Just before the darkest hours of Jesus’ life on earth, just before his own death and just before his disciples would be pursued and many of them killed - Jesus took them to the mountain where they saw what we call the “transfiguration” - they saw Jesus in all his glory along with Moses and Elijah.

Jesus gave them a glimpse of the future to encourage their minds and hearts for what was to come.

So here, Jesus gives John, his first readers, and us a glimpse into the future.

When we compare Revelation 21 and 22 with this passage we discover that John here is describing the new earth.

When God ushers in eternity he will completely renovate this earth creating a new earth on which God’s people will forever live.

What will that eternal heaven on the new earth be like?

Our imaginations are too weak to grasp this wholly.

The Bible says, "Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, and neither has it entered into the heart of people what God has prepared for them that love him."

This present earth is beautiful, too beautiful to take in sometimes, but yet according to the Apostle Peter the new earth will make this present earth pale in comparison.

There will be such beauty that our minds at present cannot comprehend it.

What will heaven on the new earth be like?

In this new place only that which is just and right will take place. John in Revelation 21 writes, "Nothing impure will ever enter it. Nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful."

The sins of person against person to which we are so prone now will be gone. No slander, gossip, defaming, lying, cheating, abusing, hurting. It will all be gone.

All injustice which so many have suffered will be gone. The wrong will be made right.

What will that heaven on the new earth be like?

In Revelation 7 and 21 we are told God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. There will be no more hunger or thirst or death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

Joni Erickson Tada one night in Philadelphia told the audience her story of the diving accident that left her a quadriplegic.

Near the end of her testimony she said something about heaven. "She said that when she got to heaven, the first thing she wanted to do was to ask Jesus for a dance. Then from her wheelchair she sang about this hope" this great future that is hers on the new earth. (Gilmore Probing Heaven p176)

What will that heaven on the new earth be like?

Most of all it will be the place where Jesus is!
"The Lamb will be their shepherd."

Many of you know the story of John Newton the author of "Amazing Grace", the slave trader who was saved by Jesus.

In a letter one day he wrote of what he looked forward to most in heaven:

"I hope one day to be all ear, all heart, all tongue; when I shall see the Redeemer as he is, I shall be like him. This will be heaven indeed, to behold his glory without a veil over my eyes, to rejoice in his love without a cloud, and to sing his praises without a jarring or wandering note, forever." (Gilmore p 188)

Music and singing will be one of the great occupations of heaven. Imagine the music and lyrics that most inspire you,

imagine the melodies that most speak of your feelings, your love and your worship of the Lord.

Having imagined as best you can - now consider that you can't come close to the experience of praise and music that will be ours on in that heaven on the new earth.

That's the eternity waiting for those who are sealed by almighty God.

How about you? Do you know the security of being chosen by God of having his seal on you?

Do you know that the paradise of God is your destiny?

That is the whole point of the gospel - to inform people that it is possible to belong to God now and forever.

This life with its trouble is not all there is.

Death is not the end.

There is a hell to shun and a heaven to gain.

Listen to Jesus' words:

John 3:17ff "For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God 's one and only son. 3:16: For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

If you are trusting him you need not fear the immediate future or the distant future. You need not fear the tribulation you may face today and you need not fear the great tribulation.

If you are trusting him you need not fear dying or death - God's mark is on you - you belong to him and your future is secure - you will be with him in paradise.