

UNDERSTANDING THAT WEIRD BOOK OF REVELATION - Part six

Sunday, November 12th, 2017 - 6 p.m. - Teaching #2006

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HOW GOD PROTECTS HIS CHURCH FROM THE HOUR OF HIS WRATH - The Two Multitudes of Revelation Chapter Seven

Revelation 7:1-17 - "After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree. [2] Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, [3] saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads." [4] And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel:[5] 12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed,12,000 from the tribe of Reuben,12,000 from the tribe of Gad,[6] 12,000 from the tribe of Asher,12,000 from the tribe of Naphtali, 12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh,[7] 12,000 from the tribe of Simeon,12,000 from the tribe of Levi,12,000 from the tribe of Issachar,[8] 12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun,12,000 from the tribe of Joseph,12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed. [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, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, [10] and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" [11] And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, [12] saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." [13] Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" [14] I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." [15] "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.[16] They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.[17] For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

The opening of the first six seals have just portrayed the course of this age leading up to, and including the end of the age and the outpouring of God's final wrath on Satan, Antichrist, and all those who receive their mark and follow in their ways. The stage is now set for the *close up view* of the events of the Tribulation itself. In other words, the seven trumpets *zero in* on the events of the sixth seal - **Revelation 6:12-17** - "When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, [13] and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. [14] The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. [15] Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, [16] calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, [17] for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

As the seventh seal is opened, no specific action of judgment is tied directly to it. The seventh seal *contains* the seven trumpets. Seven angels appear with seven trumpets - **Revelation 8:1-2** - "When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. [2] Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them." This second series of seven trumpets will reveal an *intensification* of the climactic events of the end of the age - the great Tribulation itself.

Chapter six ends with a question being hurled out by those who have followed Antichrist and those who persistently rejected invitations to be saved through the blood of the Lamb: "***The great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?***" (6:17).

That is a very good question. ***If God's wrath is going to be poured out on this whole earth, who is going to be able to bear it?*** How will the godly be protected? These are the questions John is about to have answered. The answer comes in the form of *two new visions* in Revelation chapter 7. These two visions deal with, a) the *sealing of the 144,000*, and b) the *multitude from every tribe and nation*. These will stand against the wrath of God because they will be sealed and protected by the Lord Himself.

God's great mercy is revealed in these two visions. We have no way of even imagining the impact these visions must have had on John. He really doesn't have words to describe the horrific events he sees. More than once panic must have settled in on his heart: "***How can these things be? What's going to become of the church?***" Imagine being shown in picture form the actual end of the world. This is what John is called to digest.

Now, because we have **read** the book of Revelation, and **know** the events that are coming, we have confidence in God's ability to accomplish His purpose for this world's future. But **John** is seeing all this for the first time. And God knows what He is going to reveal to John next - **the expanded version of the events of the great Tribulation**. So **before** that more graphic and detailed description is given, God **interrupts** the revelation of these Tribulation **events** with these two visions of **comfort and explanation**.

Remember, there will be no real interruption in the tribulation **events** themselves. In fact, as we've already seen, these events will build and pick up in intensity and pace. This is an interruption in the **visions**. Not an interruption in the **events**. John (as well as you and I) needs the comfort of these two visions **before** the revelation of the rest of the Tribulation is given.

1) **THE VISION OF THE 144,000 AND THE SEALING FOR THEIR PROTECTION FROM THE WRATH OF GOD**

This vision comes as an interruption **between** the sixth and seventh seals. The sixth seal opened up the outpouring of God's wrath, right at the very close of this age. Things would look hopeless for the entire planet were it not for the information contained in these two visions.

Chapter seven opens with a picture of the whole earth, presented in the shape of a great square with an angel at each corner. The angels are **"holding back the four winds"** of God's wrath from the earth. They are to hold back this outpouring **"until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads"** (7:3).

The purpose of this **sealing** is made even more clear if you jump ahead in the book of Revelation. After the sounding of the **fifth trumpet** a plague of locusts falls upon the earth, but the infliction of this plague is not **universal**. It only falls on those who **"have not the seal of God on their foreheads"** (9:4).

Clearly, the sealing of these people is to keep them from partaking of the wrath of God along with those allied with Satan and the Antichrist. John's vision is very reminiscent of God's protection of Israel while Egypt was punished. Israel wasn't **removed** from Egypt at this time. Rather, over and over again, God protected Israel from the plagues He sent to torment Egypt. God is going to do this same **kind** of miracle again.

2) **WHO ARE THE 144,000?**

This is truly one of the most difficult and controversial matters in the entire book of Revelation. Opinions vary greatly. The two main options are: The 144,000 refers to the **salvation of the Jews**. Or, the 144,000 is a **symbolic picture of the church**.

My own opinion is that neither one of these explanations will work well if it is taken to the exclusion of the other. In other words, I don't think it is possible to say these 144,000 are **just** a picture of the church, with no Jewish application at all. Why the detailed description of the twelve tribes of Israel? If this number is just a picture of the complete church, why not **just** describe them as being a people from every nation and every tribe and every people - like the great multitude in John's second vision in this chapter is described?:

Revelation 7:9 - **"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, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands...."**

That sounds like the church to me. It's made up of people from all the corners of the earth. But this first vision describes in fair detail the **Jewish background** of this first multitude.

However, having said that, I don't think it works very well to make this sealing of the 144,000 refer to the **salvation of just the Jewish people**. First of all, because the text makes it clear that these 144,000 are already **"servants of God" before** they are sealed. They are already **believers**. They are not sealed **to be** saved. They are sealed as a form of **protection** because they **already are saved**.

"Then who is this first crowd, pastor Don?" Everyone speculates, but here's my own opinion. I believe the 144,000 represent the **entire church**, with a special emphasis on the inclusion of **Jews who will have come to Christ in the last days**. In other words, I think the 144,000 are the church, but the church with an emphasis on it being the **new Israel - spiritual Israel - the complete people of God**.

Somewhere, somehow, and sometime *before* this sealing takes place, we know there will be a massive turning of Jewish people to Jesus Christ, the true Messiah. The Apostle Paul talks at great length about this end time conversion of Israel:

Romans 11:22-27 - "Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. [23] And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. [24] For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree. [25] Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, *until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.* [26] *And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, "The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob";* [27] "and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins."

God still has a special work to do among the Jews. Many will return to God through Jesus Christ, the Messiah. Then, before the wrath of God is poured out on this whole world, all these people - Jews and Gentiles - will be sealed as spiritual Israel - the completed people of God.

The New Testament repeatedly refers to the whole church in Jewish terminology. The church *is* spiritual Israel - the new complete people of God:

Galatians 3:29 - "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."

Romans 4:11 - "....He [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well...."

Romans 2:28-29 - "For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. [29] But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God."

In fact, we know that this kind of imagery for the church was an understanding the Apostle John had, even while on the Island of Patmos, from the vision of the seven churches, which we studied earlier: **Revelation 2:9, 3:9** - "I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan....3:9.... Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet and they will learn that I have loved you."

Twice John hears of those who say they are Jews, but are not. This doesn't mean these people were lying about their ethnicity. It means they weren't a part of the *true* Israel. They were of Jewish decent. But that didn't make them true Israel. They weren't followers of God, but rather, were followers of Satan.

So in John's first vision of chapter seven, he sees this angel holding back the coming wrath of God until these people - Jews and Gentiles - the complete spiritual Israel - are sealed and protected from the wrath of God that is about to be poured out in the seven trumpets and the seven bowls.

3) **WHY ARE THESE PEOPLE NUMBERED EXACTLY AT 144,000?**

Again, there are many guesses. People guess because, if we're at all honest, we have to admit *John isn't told why they are numbered*. Most commentators see in the 12 X 12 multiple a picture of completeness. God's work will have run its course.

That may well be true. But let me give you just another thought that I've not seen in print or ever heard explained before. How did John *know* there were 144,000 separate sealed? Certainly he didn't *count* them off. He didn't check the math. So obviously he was *told* or *shown* the number of 144,000. Why such a specific number? I think to get a good answer to that question you have to jump ahead in the book of Revelation just for a minute:

Revelation 14:1-5 - "Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. [2] And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, [3] and they were

singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. [4] It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb, [5] and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless."

Here we have a vision that *jumps ahead in time*. It views the redeemed *after* the Tribulation. Here is a vision that looks at a multitude gathered joyously around the throne with the Lamb. They sing the praises of their redemption and the joy of being with God Almighty (certainly there will be more than 144,000 doing this!).

Church, listen - *I would be so terribly disappointed if John saw 143,996* redeemed singing around the throne of God. That would just break my heart. Perhaps one of the missing was Reni, or my parents, or my children. Perhaps it would be me!

I think the reason John is given this specific number is he will see this crowd again, in vision form, after all the fury of the Tribulation. He will see them after Satan and the Antichrist and the false prophet have done their worst. He will see this same crowd again after the dreadful wrath of God is poured out over the earth. And guess what. They're *all* there around the Lamb singing His praises! *That's the practical point of hope from tonight's study! God knows how to keep his own!*

4) JOHN SEES ANOTHER MULTITUDE IN HIS SECOND VISION IN CHAPTER SEVEN

Very quickly, these come out of every tribe and nation and people of the earth. And John is told something else very important about this multitude. We are given more details here than in the first vision. We *know* who these people are:

Revelation 7:13-17 - "Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" [14] I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. [15] "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.[16] They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.[17] For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Each week I've been asked about the *twenty four elders* around the throne. We've already encountered them several times. It's a very common interpretation to see them as the raptured church, already gathered around the throne of God (check, for instance, the notes on these verses in the NIV Study Bible). One reason I have a hard time with this is whenever they speak (**5:8-10, 7:13-16**) there seems to be a concerted effort on their part to *separate themselves* from the redeemed through they are describing. I believe these elders are some type of angelic beings.

But these closing words of chapter seven reveal something else very illuminating and important. This multitude is pictured in a *futuristic vision* that sees this multitude *as though the Tribulation has already taken place (7:15-17)*. Some people think this is a description of the righteous dead in the *intermediate state*. But I don't think so.

I think this description lines up much better with the description of our future reign with Jesus Christ in glory as it's described in **Revelation 22:1-5** - "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb [2] through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. [3] No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. [4] They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. [5] And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever."

In fact, here's my opinion. These two visions are actually two pictures of the *same multitude*. John is shown the same group of the redeemed from *two different perspectives*. The first vision shows God *sealing* the redeemed in *preparation* for the Tribulation and the outpouring of His divine wrath. The second vision shows the same group at the *conclusion* of the Tribulation. True, they have been spared the wrath of God, but they have *not* been spared the persecution of Satan and the Antichrist. Many have been *martyred*. However, not one of them has been *lost*.

I frequently talk to Christians who seem shocked that God will allow the church to be persecuted to the extent of martyrdom during the Tribulation. Frankly, I don't understand this thinking at all. Jesus taught all of us, as His disciples, not

to be *surprised* at the thought of intense persecution. Rather, He said it was to be the *normal state of affairs for His people in this present age*: **John 16:33** - "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

The rest of the New Testament rings out with the very same message: **1 Peter 4:12-13** - "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. [13] But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed."

Last year over 200,000 Christians were martyred because of their faith. Tell them you don't think we North American Christians should be around to suffer persecution during the Tribulation. How would those words sound to them?

Remember, John is shown all of this in preparation for the sounding of the seven trumpets and pouring out of the seven bowls. This is how God prepares John to receive the stunning vision of what is yet to come. The message is to stand firm. He is able to keep you from falling,