

Revelation week #17

Survivors of the wrath of God

Revelation 7:1-8

I. Introduction

- a. Read
- b. The previous chapter of Revelation (6) looked at a time of unprecedented disaster, unrelieved terror, and unimaginable slaughter that lies ahead for the world.
- c. Commonly known as the Tribulation, it will be the time when Jesus Christ takes back the earth from the usurper, Satan.
- d. That action is symbolized in the book of Revelation by His unrolling of a seven-sealed scroll.
- e. As He breaks each seal, a new divine judgment is poured out on the earth. The judgments of the first five seals were severe.
- f. But the disasters associated with the sixth seal (the beginning of the Day of the Lord) will far surpass those of the first five seals.
- g. And the judgments of the seventh seal, which contains the even more intense trumpet and bowl judgments, will be the worst of all.
- h. The world will refuse to acknowledge that the disasters of the first five seals are God's judgment—despite the warnings from believers that they are.
- i. But the events of the sixth seal will be so horrific that all will be forced to acknowledge them as the judgment of God.

- j. In their terror, amid their futile attempts to hide from the terrible presence of God the Father and the Lamb, people will cry out, “The great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?” (6:17).
- k. Chapter 7 forms a parenthetical section between the sixth (6:12–17) and seventh (8:1) seals to answer that question, introducing two groups who will survive the fury of divine judgment.
- l. The first, those described in verses 1–8, are the Jewish evangelists who will be preserved on earth.
 - i. They will survive the holocaust of divine wrath unleashed by the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments.
 - ii. God will also protect them from the murderous efforts of Antichrist and his henchmen to wipe out believers in the true God.
 - iii. Having survived the wars, famine, unprecedented natural disasters, disease, rampant, unchecked sinfulness, and savage persecution of the Tribulation, they will enter the millennial kingdom alive.
 - iv. The second group to escape divine fury (vv. 9–17) are those who will be martyred and thereby ushered into the blissful rest of heaven, where they will be preserved.
 - v. After the horrific events of the sixth seal, and before the opening of the seventh seal in chapter 8, the Holy Spirit provided this chapter as an interlude for the reader to catch his breath.
 - vi. It is also a reminder that in the midst of His wrath, God will remember mercy (cf. Hab. 3:2).

- m. This pair of visions contrasts the preparedness of believers, who will be delivered from wrath, with the panic and devastation of the unbelievers, who will not survive that wrath.
 - i. First Thessalonians 5:3 declares that “destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape.”
 - ii. In his second letter to the Thessalonians Paul adds, “The Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Thess. 1:7–9).
 - iii. Later in that epistle the apostle wrote, “For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness” (2 Thess. 2:11–12).
 - iv. The Bible offers no hope that any ungodly person in that Day will escape God’s judgment.
 - v. The Day of the Lord will eventually destroy all the ungodly who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of Christ.
- n. That God will preserve His people in the time of judgment is a familiar theme in Scripture.

- i. David triumphantly exulted, “The righteous cry, and the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all” (Ps. 34:17–19).
- o. Malachi describes God’s comforting of those who feared being swept away by the judgments of the Day of the Lord: Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord gave attention and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who esteem His name. “They will be Mine,” says the Lord of hosts, “on the day that I prepare My own possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him. So you will again distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him. For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze,” says the Lord of hosts, “so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall....Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I

will not come and smite the land with a curse.” (Mal. 3:16–4:2, 5–6)

- i. When God destroyed the world in the Flood, He preserved Noah and his family.
 - ii. When He destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, He preserved Lot and his daughters.
 - iii. When He destroyed Jericho, He preserved Rahab and her household.
 - iv. And when He destroyed Egypt, He preserved the nation of Israel.
- p. The Tribulation is revealed to be a time of unparalleled judgment, disaster, and death.
- i. But it will also be for many the time of salvation. Some of those redeemed out of the Tribulation have already been mentioned in connection with the fifth seal (6:9–11).
 - ii. They were martyrs, killed because of their faithfulness to the Word of God and to the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. 7:9–17).
 - iii. Many believers will surely die from the wars, famine, and natural disasters (6:3–8, 12–14) that God brings in judgment on the earth.
 - iv. Countless others will die as a result of Antichrist’s persecution (13:7–10; 14:12–13; 17:6; 20:4).
 - v. Their physical deaths are not, however, a result of God’s wrath (1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9) any more than when a believer dies today.
 - vi. God’s judgments on the world and Antichrist’s persecution are just the means by which God ushers them into His presence.

- q. Many believers, however, will not die, but will survive to populate the millennial kingdom.
 - i. Jesus taught that truth in His description of the sheep and goat judgment (Matt. 25:31ff.). The goats (the unsaved) will be cast into hell (vv. 41–46), but to the sheep (the saved) Jesus will say, “Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (v. 34).
 - ii. Believers who are alive at the Lord’s second coming will live on in His earthly kingdom.
- r. Many of those who enter the millennial kingdom alive will be Gentiles (cf. Isa. 2:2–4; Mic. 4:1–5; Zech. 8:20–23).
 - i. But the Tribulation is also the time of Israel’s national salvation, of which the prophets spoke. The most detailed description of that event is found in Zechariah’s prophecy: “I [the Lord] will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn. In that day there will be great mourning in Jerusalem.... “It will come about in all the land,” declares the Lord, “that two parts in it will be cut off and perish; but the third will be left in it. And I will bring the third part through the fire, refine them as silver is refined, and test them as gold is tested. They will

call on My name, and I will answer them; I will say, ‘They are My people,’ and they will say, ‘The Lord is my God.’ ” (Zech. 12:10–13:1, 8–9)

- s. This is the time of which the apostle Paul spoke when he wrote “And so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, ‘The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob’ ” (Rom. 11:26).
- t. Revelation 7:1–8 introduces the group of survivors (for others see 12:16–17), preserved in the midst of the maelstrom of the Tribulation, who have been redeemed for some time but, as the final fury hits, are set apart for special service and given special protection.
- u. John’s vision of this special group of people contains three features: wrath restrained, saints sealed, and Israelites identified.

II. WRATH RESTRAINED

- a. **(7:1)**
- b. The phrases **after this** and “after these things,” usually followed by some form of the verb *eidon* (“to see”), are used several times in Revelation to introduce a new vision (cf. 4:1; 7:1; 7:9; 15:5; 18:1; 19:1, “heard”).
- c. The use of **after this** in this passage signifies that the vision of the sixth seal has ended and John is about to see a new vision.
 - i. It may also indicate that this new vision depicts events that come after the sixth seal chronologically.
 - ii. The scene now shifts from judgment on the ungodly to special protection for the godly.

- d. As the vision unfolded, John first **saw four angels**.
- i. **Angels** are frequently associated in Scripture with God's judgment (cf. 8:2ff.; 9:1ff.; 11:15–19; 14:15ff.; 15:1ff.; 16:1ff.; 18:1ff.; 19:17–18; 2 Sam. 24:16–17; 2 Kings 19:35; Ps. 78:49; Matt. 13:39–42, 49–50; 16:27; 25:31; 2 Thess. 1:7–8).
 - ii. These **four** are given power over the elements of nature (cf. 14:18; 16:5); they are seen **standing at the four corners of the earth holding back the four winds of the earth** (cf. Jer. 49:36; Matt. 24:31).
 - iii. Unsophisticated skeptics imagine that John's poetic reference to the **four corners of the earth** reflects a primitive notion that the earth is flat and square.
 - iv. But the phrase actually refers to the whole earth by designating the four primary points on the compass (north, south, east, and west), from which directions **the four winds** (i.e., all the winds) **of the earth** originate.
 - v. Dr. Henry M. Morris comments, This verse has long been derided as reflecting a naive “prescientific” concept of earth structure, one that supposedly viewed the earth as flat with four corners. ... In terms of modern technology, it is essentially equivalent to what a mariner or geologist would call the four quadrants of the compass, or the four directions. This is evident also from the mention of the “four winds” which, in common usage, would of course be the north, west, south, and east winds. Parenthetically,

accurate modern geodetic measurements in recent years have proved that the earth actually does have four “corners.” These are protuberances standing out from the basic “geoid,” that is, the basic spherical shape of the earth. The earth is not really a perfect sphere, but is slightly flattened at the poles. Its equatorial bulge is presumably caused by the earth’s axial rotation, and its four “corners” protrude from that. (*The Revelation Record* [Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1983], 126)

- e. From their key positions on the earth, these powerful angels ensured **that no wind would blow on the earth or on the sea or on any tree.**
 - i. The four winds are often associated in Scripture with God’s judgment (cf. Jer. 49:36; Dan. 7:2; Hos. 13:15).
 - ii. For the duration of the interlude described in chapter 7 judgment will be held back as the angels turn off the essential engine of earth’s atmosphere.
 - iii. There will be no wind, no breeze, no waves breaking on the shore, no movement of clouds in the sky; everything will be deathly still.
 - iv. That is an incredible display of power
- f. **Holding back** is from *krateō*, a strong word that suggests that the winds are struggling to break free from their restraint.
 - i. The angelic restraining of the wind also symbolizes the withholding of the plagues associated with the imminent trumpet judgments (8:5ff.).

- ii. So the next phase of God's wrath is restrained for the moment.
- iii. The winds of judgment are gathering force, soon to be released.

III. SAINTS SEALED

- a. **(7:2–3)**
- b. The reason for the temporary restraining of God's judgment becomes clear as John sees **another angel** in addition to the four holding back the winds.
- c. Some have identified this angel as Jesus Christ, but that is unlikely because *allos* (**another**) means another in numerical sequence, another of the same kind as the first four angels.
- d. Though Christ appeared in the Old Testament as the Angel of the Lord, He is not in essence of nature an angel.
- e. In addition, by using the plural pronoun "we" in verse 3 the fifth angel identifies with the first four in the work of sealing God's servants.
- f. John saw the angel **ascending from the rising of the sun.**
 - i. That is a poetic way of saying from the east, the point of the compass in which the sun rises.
 - ii. From John's perspective on the isle of Patmos, the east would be toward the land of Israel, the land where God's promised salvation came through Jesus the Messiah, and from where the twelve tribes of Israel came—members of which are about to be sealed.
- g. The angel had with him **the seal of the living God.** *Sphragis* (**seal**) often referred to a signet ring.

- i. Kings or other officials would use such rings to stamp into wax on documents or other items, thereby affirming their authenticity and guaranteeing their security (cf. Gen. 41:42; Est. 3:10; 8:2, 8; Dan. 6:17; Matt. 27:66). A **seal** thus denoted ownership and protection (cf. John 6:27; 2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13; 4:30).
- h. In contrast to the seals of petty earthly rulers, the seal borne by the angel was that of **the living God**.
 - i. The Bible frequently identifies God as the living God (cf. 4:9–10; 10:6; 15:7; Deut. 5:26; Josh. 3:10; 1 Sam. 17:26; 2 Kings 19:4; Pss. 42:2; 84:2; Jer. 10:10; 23:36; Dan. 6:20; Hos. 1:10; Matt. 16:16; Rom. 9:26; 2 Cor. 3:3; 6:16; 1 Tim. 3:15; 4:10; Heb. 3:12; 9:14; 10:31; 12:22) to distinguish Him from the dead idols worshiped by unbelievers.
 - ii. His eternality guarantees that He will accomplish all His will.
 - iii. The most prominent false deity of the Tribulation period, Antichrist, will seal his followers (13:16–17; 14:9–11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4), and the true and living God will seal His.
- i. Revelation 14:1 identifies the mark left by God's seal as the names of Christ and the Father.
 - i. In the Old Testament, God marked Israel with blood on their doorposts and lintels to spare them when He killed Egypt's firstborn.
 - ii. He marked Rahab with a scarlet cord to keep her and those with her from being killed. But the illustration that most nearly parallels the present passage comes from Ezekiel 9:3–6: Then the glory of the God of Israel went up from the

cherub on which it had been, to the threshold of the temple. And He called to the man clothed in linen at whose loins was the writing case. The Lord said to him, “Go through the midst of the city, even through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations which are being committed in its midst.” But to the others He said in my hearing, “Go through the city after him and strike; do not let your eye have pity and do not spare. Utterly slay old men, young men, maidens, little children, and women, but do not touch any man on whom is the mark.”

- j. Those with God’s mark on them would be spared in the coming destruction of Jerusalem.
 - i. Similarly, these servants of God whom the angel will mark with God’s seal will be protected from and preserved through the judgments yet to come (cf. 9:4).
- k. Urgently, authoritatively, the fifth angel **cried out with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, saying, “Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.”**
- l. The **harm** or damaging devastation that will come to the **earth, the sea**, and the **trees** will occur when the four angels suddenly release the judgment (symbolized by the winds) they have been restraining.
 - i. But that judgment (and the trumpet and bowl judgments to follow) had to wait until the angels

had **sealed the servants of God on their foreheads.**

- ii. That they are referred to as **servants** indicates they are already redeemed.
- iii. They will have remained faithful to God and the Lord Jesus, and will have probably been powerfully and effectively preaching His Word in the midst of the chaos of the first six seals.
- iv. At this point they are to be protected so they can continue to proclaim the Word of God and the truth about His Son Jesus Christ during the most severe times.
- m. After the sealing is complete the judgments can begin, from which those sealed will be exempt.
- n. Revelation 14:1–5 describes their morally pure, undefiled character and their devotion to Jesus Christ.
- o. They are the most faithful, loyal, diligent, holy servants of God during these dark days; they are the cream of the crop.
 - i. They are also described as having been “purchased from among men as first fruits to God and to the Lamb” (14:4).
 - ii. They will also be the most effective missionaries the world has ever seen, and will be instrumental in the conversion of both their own countrymen and the nations.

IV. ISRAELITES IDENTIFIED

- a. **(7:4–8)**
- b. These Jewish believers and evangelists are the firstfruits of Israel, which as a nation will be redeemed

before Christ returns (Zech. 12:10–13:1, 8–9; Rom. 11:26).

- c. The 144,000 are not all Jewish believers at that time, but a unique group selected to proclaim the gospel in that day (cf. 12:17; 14:1–5).
- d. Despite the plain and unambiguous declaration of the text that the **one hundred and forty-four thousand** who are to be **sealed** will come **from every tribe of the sons of Israel**, many persist in identifying them as the church.
- e. They cite several New Testament passages that allegedly identify the church as Israel to support that interpretation.
- f. But the identification of Israel with the church in those passages is tenuous and disputed.
 - i. So, they can offer no support for such an identification in the present passage.
 - ii. The fact is that “no clear-cut example of the church being called ‘Israel’ exists in the NT or in ancient church writings until A.D. 160. ... This fact is crippling to any attempt to identify Israel as the church in Rev. 7:4” (Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* [Chicago: Moody, 1992], 476).
 - iii. Further, “such an attempt becomes even more ridiculous because it necessitates typological interpretation that divides the church into twelve tribes to coincide with the listing of Rev. 7:5–8, even with all the irregularities in that list” (Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 476).

- iv. The term **Israel** must be interpreted in accordance with its normal Old and New Testament usage as a reference to the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
- v. Nor is there any reason not to interpret the numbers 144,000 and 12,000 literally.
- g. That there were 12,000 **sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel** speaks of God's elective purpose.
 - i. Mere random human choice would not come up with such an even division.
 - ii. While the tribal records were lost when the Romans sacked Jerusalem in A.D. 70, God knows who belongs to each tribe.
 - iii. This passage also teaches that the so-called "ten lost tribes" were, in fact, never lost (cf. 21:12; Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:30; James 1:1).
 - iv. Instead, representatives from the ten northern tribes filtered south and intermingled with the two southern tribes (cf. 2 Chron. 30:1–11; 34:1–9) and thus were preserved.
- h. The specific tribal names in this list raise some interesting questions.
 - i. First, however, it should be noted that there is no standard way of listing the twelve tribes.
 - ii. There are at least nineteen different ways of listing them in the Old Testament, none of which agree with the list given here: In the Old Testament lists, sometimes the order of birth is followed (Gen. 29:32–35:18). At other times, it is the order of Jacob's blessing them (Gen. 49:3–27), the order of encampment (Num. 2:3–31), the

order of the census before the invasion of Canaan (Num. 26:4–51), the order of blessing and cursing (Deut. 27:12–13), the order of Moses’ blessing (Deut. 33:6–25), the order of “the princes” (Num. 1:5–15), the order of inheritance (Josh. 13:7–22:34), the order by the wives and concubines (1 Chron. 2:1–8:40), and the order of the gates of the city (Ezek. 48:31–34). (Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 479)

- i. Although Reuben was the firstborn (Gen. 46:8), Judah is listed first.
 - i. Reuben forfeited his birthright as punishment for his sexual misconduct with his father’s concubine (1 Chron. 5:1).
 - ii. The omission of the tribe of Dan in favor of the priestly tribe of Levi is also unusual.
 - iii. Dan was evidently omitted due to the tribe’s penchant for idolatry (cf. Deut. 29:18–21)—which was even worse than that of the rest of the nation (cf. Judg. 18; Amos 8:14).
 - iv. While Dan will share in the millennial blessings (Ezek. 48:1–2, 32) the tribe will not be selected for this duty nor protected during the Tribulation.
 - v. Similarly, the name of Ephraim is omitted in favor of his father Joseph because Ephraim defected from the ruling house of Judah (Isa. 7:17).
 - vi. Also Ephraim, like Dan, was consumed with idolatry (Hos. 4:17). His brother Manasseh is included because he was the faithful son of Joseph.

- j. This critical passage reinforces the biblical truth that God is not through with the nation of Israel (cf. Rom. 9–11).
- k. Though Israel failed in its mission to be a witness nation in the Old Testament, that will not be the case in the future.
 - i. From the Jewish people will come the greatest missionary force the world has ever known.
 - ii. The result of their effort will be a redeemed Israel, as promised by God, and innumerable redeemed Gentiles.¹

¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 212–221.