

Stand Steadfast in the Love of God

(Sermon 15 – Rev. 7)

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Good morning and Greetings in the name of Jesus. Welcome to our unfolding study of the book of Revelation.

Almost 6 decades ago, an eternity for the young, yet fleeting moments for the aged, Stevie Wonder released a Motown hit that spent 6 weeks at number one on the charts, and later that year earned him his 6th Grammy award. The title for that song captures the gist of our text today quite well. "Signed, Sealed, Delivered (I'm Yours)".

Unlike the song, where the lover is regretting his mistake of having left his beloved, in today's text, chapter 7 of Revelation, it is the beloved responding to our lover with songs of thanksgiving and rejoicing- singing I'm only signed, sealed and delivered, because I am yours. Let's open the scriptures together and see "*Oh what manner of love the Father has given unto us!*"

There is a lot going on in the section of scripture before us. As I have read it over many times, I find myself getting lost and my mind frequently wondering. Initially, I thought it might be helpful to break it into quarters:

-Situation of the Saints

-Sealing of the Saints

-Who Are the Saints

-Song of the Saints

Before we get too far, there are several questions I would like to ask to whet our appetites. So think with me for a moment about 2 thoughts: Numbers in scripture, and deciphering prophetic texts.

Did God create the world in 7 days, or is the number framing our 7 day week just a figurative number? Are there 10 commandments, or is the number ten simply a rounding device signifying fullness, divine order, and the perfection of God's will as in the 10 plagues, the 10 generations in various genealogies, and the 10 talents in the NT?

Did Moses meet with God on the mountain for 40 days? Did it take the Israelites 40 years to reach the promised land? Did the flood waters rain for 40 days and 40 nights? Or is 40 just a symbolic proclamation of trials, and their finish?

Did Adam live for 930 years, and Methuselah for almost 1000 years, in the periods before the flood?

How do we deal with numeric texts in the bible? When are they figurative and when are they literal? Did Jacob have 12 sons forming the tribes of Israel? Did Jesus have 12 apostolic disciples? Are those real numbers or are they just figurative to convey completeness?

Having an awareness of how to decipher numerical texts in the scriptures is an important part of understanding scripture. And today we face a real challenge with that exact issue. All food for good thought.

Additionally, As we continue to unfold the text of the apocalypse: a book whose stated intention and meaning is to reveal or 'take the cover off' of the mysteries of Christ, we have to wrestle with the many images, symbols, and numbers.

At first glance it often seems that the very book that is supposed to be bringing clarity for us is chock full of added mystery.

Our ongoing studies have reminded us that this is a book to not be overly dogmatic on; there are many wonderful believing Christians who have very different eschatological views on the end times, and how they will unfold.

One concept that has helped me when embracing these topics, is to keep in mind that Prophetic predictions throughout time often have a 'near term' and 'longer term' meanings. I've heard it said that we should imagine the prophetic future as seeing a mountain range from far away. The peaks stand brightly above the terrain and clearly visible from where we stand. The peaks even seem to be relatively close together. Two peaks may even appear as one. However, as we get closer to the mountain ranges we realize there are many peaks, and some of them are not as they originally appeared or as close to one another as we suspected.

The Jews in Christ's day had this problem when trying to understand the messiah. There are prophetic predictions of both the suffering messiah, and the reigning messiah. Their focus was on the reigning messiah, so much so that they missed seeing Jesus as the human incarnation of the "Son of God".

I find it quite interesting that when the wise men were asked to reveal, from prophetic literature, where the messiah was to be born, they knew very clearly from scripture that it was in Bethlehem. So many understood the details of the prophecy yet failed to see the Messiah.

Lord willing we will guard our hearts and minds and hold dear to the major revelation: that Father, in LOVE, sent Jesus the son of God, to save sinners. He will return in glory, and there will be a vengeful wrath in the last days to account for all iniquity and injustice.

Let's dive in now and look at Revelation 7: and recall that God 's Love enables us to stand Steadfast." Let's pray and ask God's blessing on our time.

(PRAY)

Revelation 7:1–9

[1] 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...

PROP: "God 's Love enables us to stand Steadfast."

I. The Situation of the Saints

[1] 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.

We have seen in the last weeks starting in Rev 5 that the Lamb of God is the only one worthy to open the 7 scrolls announcing the wrath and judgment of God against sinners. To date the first 6 seals have been opened, and the corresponding destruction to the living, the cosmos, and the earth is immeasurable and horrific. The final 7th seal is yet to be opened, which will occur in Chapter 8.

Almost universally, commentators readily agree on two things: First, chapter 7 appears to be an interlude to the 7 seal judgements. A short pause in the action from the curses of the scrolls to pursue a different goal. Secondly, chapter 7 seems to be the answer to the last question at the end of Chapter 6: who can stand and endure the wrath of the Lamb?

John Macarthur makes this clear-

“Verse 17 [of chapter 6] is very important for understanding ...chapter 7, because they ask the question, ‘Who is able to stand?’ ... We could safely say that chapter 7 is the answer to that question. Who will survive the divine fury? Who will survive the anger and wrath of God? Who can survive the horrors of the 6th seal?”

Chapter 7 opens by introducing a calm on the earth, as 4 angels are directed to hold back the winds of judgement. Think now as we read, Are there really 4 angels? Or is ‘four’ just a biblical number representing earthly action? Is it a figurative analogy corresponding to the 4 points on the compass? Are the angels stopping the literal wind, or is wind just a symbol for the furious wrath of God’s horrors scathing against the earth and its inhabitants?

A literal interpretation, which I believe we would corporately hold, would suggest that yes there are 4 angels, and they are legitimately holding back the wind, which is contextually representing the harsh horrors of the 6 seals that have just been opened.

This chapter has several difficulties that unfold in both numbers and symbols. Lord willing, we will address them, but not necessarily being decidedly conclusive in every matter. There are three key distinctions to be aware of.

Leon Morris frames the interpretive tensions before us as well as anyone;

“...Commentators differ as to whether the 144,000 and the great multitude later in the chapter are the same or different groups, whether the former refers to a literal or spiritual Israel, and whether either or both [groups] refer to the martyrs. There is little [direct] evidence to decide these points and we must be guided by our understanding of the book as a whole”.

To help us, normal exegesis, especially regarding numerical phrases, includes several elements to consider when looking to interpret the text of scripture: First Context is always key: We are to analyze the surrounding verses- understanding the original author's intent as they were communicating to the original hearers, as well as, the overall theme of the passage to see if the number is being used to convey a literal or specific symbolic meaning.

The most basic interpretative principle is generally to interpret text and numbers literally unless the context strongly suggests otherwise. If there is obvious hyperbole, or symbolic patterns, then interpretation can be more figurative. The default is to prioritize interpreting literally unless the surrounding context clearly indicates otherwise.

This is a soft science, and has been the source of many, many false doctrines.

So while this could be figurative, there is every reason to believe that the literal 4 angels could accomplish the task at hand. Moreover, literally or figuratively, the wrath of God is postponed to highlight a specific mission.

That brings us to the second quarter:

II. Sealing of the Saints

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.”

We are now presented in the vision with another angel who is giving direction to the 4 angels to do no harm to the earth until he finishes his task. The word seal is used twice in these two verses and it frames the mission and context for the chapter; God is sending the angel to seal the servants so that eternal judgment will not destroy them. In The first reference the Angel is carrying the seal of the

living god. Essentially it is to the tool to do the sealing, and the second reference indicates the completing the task.

The easiest illustration for a tool might be a signet ring, used in ages past to seal an envelope or a legal document. Hot wax was dropped on the envelope to close the letter, and then the signet ring was pressed into the wax to 'seal' the letter. This both protected the contents and identified the author. A more contemporary example could be the simple taping of a box in a move. After we fill the box, we wrap the seams with tape to keep the contents safe. Then we label it for identification. Send this to Matt and Rachel's new house and put it in the garage.

This concept of sealing is well versed in scripture starting with both physical examples, and at other times spiritual demarcations.

In the initial Passover, Moses was told to mark the doorways of the Israelites with blood on the doorpost. Anyone who was 'sealed' inside the home of the Passover blood was protected from the wrath of the vengeful angels of death. Anyone not within the seal was cursed.

A second vivid example is in Ezekiel 9. The Lord sent angels to mark the righteous people of God to protect them from angelic terrors.

The new testament references the concept regularly as well. In each of the examples the meaning has similar but variant meanings. John Piper's article on 'sealing' helped clarify these thoughts.

In Matthew 27:66, the tomb of Jesus was sealed to secure it. In Revelation 20:3 God throws Satan into a pit and seals it over so he can't escape. So one meaning is locking something up, or closing it in.

Another example is found in Romans 4:11 where Abraham's circumcision is called the sign and seal of the righteousness he had by faith. So a second meaning of sealing is giving a sign of authenticity.

A third meaning is found here in Revelation 7:3 where the seal of God is put on the forehead of God's servants to protect them from the wrath coming upon the world.

Perhaps The most famous reference might be in Eph. 1:14.

"In him you who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which

is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory."

Every believer who has heard the word of truth, and believed in him is sealed by the Holy Spirit.

The term is regeneration, or being 'born again'. As we receive the word of truth, and make a confession of faith, we are 'sealed' by the Spirit as a sign of authenticity, protection, and kept until the end. We have received his spirit, and we are new creations, with his spirit living in us. We are sons and daughters of God. We have his life living in us and he will keep and protect us into eternity.

2nd Peter 2 makes it clear that "*the Lord knows how to rescue the godly...* He kept Noah and his family safe as he sealed him in the ark, while cursing the world with a flood. He also kept Lot safe, while raining down fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah. God knows how to keep his servants safe from wrath, and he will keep us into eternity, no matter what judgements come upon the earth.

III. Who are these Saints?

[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... [13] Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?"

We now have two comments regarding who was sealed. If you will note, The first is something John heard, and the second is something John saw. The question most often debated is whether this is one group from two different perspectives, or is it 2 separate groups. Is the specific number of 144,000 of the tribe of Israel different from the great multitude, of every tribe, people and languages, that no one could number, or is it the same group being described from two perspectives?

There is merit to honoring the text very literally that the 12 tribes of Israel will produce 144,000 (12 squared and then cubed by 1000) believers to help serve the living God in the last days. Many people and scholars tend to think this way. In fact, I have been taught and believed this for most of my life.

However, there are a number of textual clues that might persuade us to think differently about this very literal interpretation, and what it might mean. Let's start with the number 12. For instance, Jesus chose 12 Apostles, one reason appears to have been to map to the 12 tribes of Israel. The number was symbolic, but also literal—there were 12 actual men, and 12 sons of Jacob.

While the "12 Tribes of Israel," is consistent in its reference, the list of names of the tribes have shifted through time from the original literal 12, yet the total number never changes; implying that it may sometimes be symbolic. There are reportedly upward of 20 reference lists in scripture of who the 12 tribes are. And there are at least 15 different names included in the various lists of the "12 tribes". Notably, not many of the lists are the same with names jostled in and out.

So the list of tribal names varies in name and order throughout scripture, yet we still reference the 'twelve tribes of Israel'.

We also have many references to the numeral 1000. One author noted that there are "more than twenty references to 1000 in Revelation, and not once is it employed in a literal sense." It is normally used as a number of 'completeness'. Another author, William Milligan, observed:

"The thousand years' mentioned in the passage embody an idea; and that idea, ...is the idea of completeness or perfection." (An Exposition of the Bible, Hartford, CT: S.S. Scranton, 1903, V

So contextually, it would appear that this number may not be a literal 144,000 from the tribe of Israel, but rather a reference to the complete gathering of the Old and possibly the new testament saints; i.e. the church of Christ.

As we pivot from the 144,000 that John heard described, to what he actually saw in the vision, the 'complete' number of saints is seen standing before throne is actually *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,*

Another way to convey what may be being stated here might be, John heard that 'all of them' e.g. all the saints of God had been sealed by the angel, and when he looked to see the number of sealed saints it was an incomprehensibly large group.

Was John hearing about and seeing the same group of gathered saints, or was he alerted to a group of saintly servants, who will minister in the end times bringing in a great harvest?

IV. The Song of the Saints

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 vision continues to unfold, and John, like a young child coming out of Sunday school, answers the question with a question. "What did you learn in Sunday School?", ask the parent. "What did we learn in Sunday school- you know!?" And the angel answers: "*These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.*"

Again there are significant opinions on THE great tribulation. Greek scholars are fond of pointing out a very definite article "THE"; indicating a single specific referenced event interpreted as the final tribulation preceding the last days and return of Christ. This could support the 144,000 interpretation of bold preachers of the gospel (imagine 144,000 Paul's) and the corresponding harvest coming out of the last days. It is consistent with God's nature to be merciful even in judgement. Just as he was with Noah, and Lot.

Others believe this tribulation occurred in 70 AD with the crumbling of Jerusalem in response to their disobedience and actions taken against the Messiah.

Still others believe that the various atrocities, including the WWII holocaust against the Jews, and genuine believing Christians would be included in this

ongoing tribulation. I personally find it difficult to look at any of the ongoing tribulation and the recipient saints not thinking that this is the great tribulation in my life.

Is this tribulation a single massive event designated for the end of time? Or is it a reference to the ongoing children of God throughout time. Or could it be twin mountain peaks, with both a historic, and future reality.

In any case, as we learned last week, tribulation will be a cross for believing martyrs to bear. But one highlight is noted in the following sentence: *They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*

While persecution and tribulation are expected in the Christian life, it is not tribulation that makes us accepted in God. Every believer must come to Christ through the blood of the lamb. We receive our salvation when we come to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, and understand that it is by his shed blood, not our own, that makes us acceptable to the father and removes us from judgement. In fact, it is the sealing of our souls in Christ that enables us to stand in judgement.

Ps1 notes that *the wicked will not stand in the judgement, but the Lord knows the way of the righteous.* We can never be righteous on our own merit. We are credited with Righteousness from Christ's bank account. *We are accepted in the beloved,* because Christ paid the price we could never pay: A sinless life in exchange for a godless one.

It is not our martyrdom, or for that matter any other action we might take, that makes us acceptable. It is his martyrdom that covers our sins. If we are martyred and are able to keep the faith, we know it is because he has sealed us, kept us and held us through the stormy trials. He, having sealed us once for all, will not let us go. Can anything separate us from the love of God?

Rom 8:35-39

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all

creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

When I think of being a martyr, and I imagine our original hearers of this letter felt similarly, I hope that I will be faithful. But I also know *the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak*. So, my hope is in his steadfast love. That he will be faithful to keep me faithful.

And as such, we see these martyred saints singing, and crying out, “*Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!*”

We know now, and we are glad, because we hear. But like John on that day we will see and behold how wonderful our salvation is. We will see what it cost to save us, and how faithful God has been. And how wonderful the love of God is to fetch us, seal us, keep us, and bring us into the loving arms of the lamb that was slain.

We will burst into joyful praise to know we are *sheltered in his presence*, and cared for night and day, and we will live by *springs of water*, where every *tear is wiped away* because we are and have been *shepherded by the lamb in the midst of the throne*.

The song we sing together will be sparked by a deep, deep awareness of who Jesus is and what he has done for us.

Application: Abiding in the Lamb

As we close with thoughts of an application today, several thoughts settled on me from John’s epistles: rest and abide in the love of God.

2:15 *Do not love the world or the things in the world*. Like a powerful magnet, the world draws our sinful selfish lives toward ungodliness. Let his word, and spirit desensitize us to these worldly attractions, and be instead drawn to the loving merciful goodness of God.

2:28 *And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming*. Orchestrate your life in a way that it allows us to take in the scriptures, meditate on them and see that his commands are not burdensome. Allow his transforming grace access and effect in your life by the decisions we make.

3:1 See what *manner of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are*. Like Mary, when we see what we have been

saved from, our gratefulness will never cease to grow and pour forth with worship.

4:9-10 *God is love. In love ... God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ... this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. We love in response to His love. The more aware we are of the depth of his love, the happier we are to serve him and others with gracious gladness.*

Paul prays for us in Eph. 3: have strength in our inner man by the spirit to understand and bask in the unfathomable knowledge of the love of God. and that is my prayer for us today.

Conclusion

Whether this is 144,000 servants of God are Jewish saints converted in the tribulation, who in turn bring in myriads of converts, or whether this is a picture of the all the saints gathered at the end of time, all the saints will sing the same song: worthy is the lamb who is slain.

Whether THE tribulation is a single great event at the end of time, or it refers to the ongoing friction of life between Believers and the God of this world.

We can all celebrate that we have the sign of HIS cross, have been sealed by his spirit. and have been delivered from evil and the domain of darkness

On that day, we will say with all the saints that we have been” signed, sealed, delivered; because “I’m yours”.

And Despite trials and tribulations, and things happening on this earth that we just don't understand, we can and will say “*O what manner of love the father has given unto us.*”