

The Glorified Spirits in Heaven

Revelation 7:1-17

By [Derek Thomas](#)

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.

From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben 12,000, from the tribe of Gad 12,000, from the tribe of Asher 12,000, from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000, from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000, from the tribe of Simeon 12,000, from the tribe of Levi 12,000, from the tribe of Issachar 12,000, from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000, from the tribe of Joseph 12,000, from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000.

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"

Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes--who are they, and where did they come from?"

I answered, "Sir, you know."

And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

Therefore, "they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets.

Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake.

Revelation 7 functions as an interval between the opening of the sixth seal (6:12-17) and seventh seal (8:1). It is an answer to question posed at the end of chapter 6: "the great day of wrath has come, and who can stand?" (6:17). It depicts a company of the redeemed who emerge triumphant by the grace of God in Jesus Christ through "the tribulation." There are close parallels with chapter 14:1-4.

We have seen how this question was posed as a response to the opening of the sixth seal, one in a series of seven, each one glimpsing a part of the unfolding of history. To a war-torn church, the present looked difficult enough; but what about the future? Seals 2-6 had unveiled trouble of immense proportions, a glimpse of things to come, and the sixth seal had brought us to end: the judgment at the end of the age. "If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?" ([Psa.11:3](#)).

So where does chapter 7 belong in the chronology of things? "After this" (7:1) might seem at first to imply that the events of chapter 7 belong *chronologically* after chapter 6, but this hardly seems to be the case. At 7:3 it is clear that the earth has not yet been harmed. The picture does not follow what has already been described in 6:12-14 where the earth is breaking apart under the weight of judgment. We might have expected following the description of the opening of the sixth seal a depiction of the Day of Judgment itself. Instead, chapter 7 begins by saying that John sees four angels, "standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds" (7:1).

This gives us a clue as to how we should read the Book of Revelation. The chronology that John gives us is not the order in which events take place in history, but the chronology of the order of the events *as he saw them*. John is being given a vision of

the same events from a different perspective. Chapter 7 is providing for us a picture of an order of reality that exists *simultaneously* with the depiction of the judgments described in the first six seals.

What we have, then, in chapter 7 is a parallel account of the sixth chapter, repeated in a slightly different way in order to bring out an important truth not mentioned in the preceding chapter. Chapter 6 had opened with the destruction brought about by the "four horsemen of the apocalypse." Nothing has been said about the ultimate security of God's people. Will they survive the ravages of war and destruction? Will they persevere?

Who can stand?

Chapter 7, in retelling the story of things to come, tells the same story, but uses a different image—winds instead of horsemen. In this way, the imagery is a repetition of the vision of Zechariah 6 where four chariots are horsemen are said to represent the four "winds" (NIV has "spirits", [Zech. 6:5](#)). The angels of chapter 7 are given power to restrain the "winds" of destruction. No wind is to blow "on the land or on the sea or on any tree" (7:1). What was attributed to instruments of evil in chapter 6 is now attributed to angels in chapter 7. God is the ultimate sovereign over all events. Even Satan does His bidding in the end.

The question remains: who can stand? It is a question which this seventh chapter seeks to answer in a way that elicits the greatest relief to the people of God. First, the repetition of the verb "to stand" at the end of chapter 6 and the beginning of chapter 7 (6:17; 7:1) tells us immediately that the angels of heaven are unaffected by the turmoil described. They are safe and secure. They are standing firm (7:1,11). Evil, in all its machinations, does not unsettle them of their God-given positions. Throughout the turmoil, they continue to serve and worship (7:11). Heaven is a *safe* place, and worship continues unhindered even when hell itself breaks loose to destroy the world below.

In addition, "a multitude which no one could count" (7:9) are standing, too. John sees "another angel" having "the seal of the living God" who is restraining the other angels from doing their work until a seal is placed "on the foreheads of the servants of our God" (7:3). The judgments are not to take place until the servants of God are identified and secured.

Two questions emerge: what is this seal? And, who are ones who are sealed? The answer to both (as is often the case in Revelation) lies in the Old Testament.

The Sealing of 144,000

Even though the seventh seal isn't opened until chapter 8, a seal is mentioned in this chapter. "Then I saw another angel coming up out of the east having the seal of God"

(7:2). If the unsealings of chapter 6 had shown his history in all its terrifying prospects, the seal spoken of here has a different connotation. In chapter 6, seals 2-6 had unleashed evil; here they speak of peace, protection and promise. "We put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of God" (7:3). The book of Ezekiel describes a similar event whereby an angel is given responsibility to identify and seal the people of God, thereby reassuring them of their security amidst the judgment that follow (cf. [Ezek 9:1-4](#)). God identifies and thereby keeps and protects those that they belong to Him for ever. As disasters come upon the earth God reassures his people of their eternal security within the covenant of grace.

Recovered from the biblical site of Megiddo was a jasper seal bearing the figure of a roaring lion. An inscription reads; "Belonging to Shema, servant of Jeroboam." It was once the property of an official of Jeroboam II, king of Israel , 785-743 B.C. ([2 Kings 14:23-29](#)). Shema no doubt used it each day to press upon documents the seal and authority of his king. God's seals have a similar significance. We speak of the sacraments as signs and *seals*. In baptism God seals us by giving us His name; in the Lord's Supper we are promised His presence. God's seal is more than an emblem to be pressed on paper; it is His own presence promised to His people. The Holy Spirit is the seal: "having believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—the praise of His glory" ([Eph. 1:14](#); cf. [4:30](#)).

Two complimentary truths come into focus: first, God's seal is His claim upon us. "It is He who made us, and we are His" ([Psa. 100:3](#)). "The Lord's portion is His people" ([Deut. 4:10](#); [32:9](#)). Secondly, God's seal gives us claim on Him. The Spirit certifies His pledge to us. The Holy Spirit is God's down-payment on full and final salvation. It is interesting that Paul combines both of these ideas: standing and sealing in [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."

Who are ones who are sealed? The next section identifies them as the 144,000 made up of the twelve tribes of Israel (7:4-8). John sees the people of God assembled around the throne in heaven much the same way as the tribes assembled around tabernacle as described in Numbers 2. They are symbolic of the church triumphant in heaven, those who have come to realize the value of redeeming grace, of salvation by grace alone, in Christ alone (7:10). Reformation distinctives of *sola gratia*, and *soli Christo* accompany their worship. They are eager to magnify the sovereignty of God in grace, that salvation belongs to God as the author and accomplisher of redemption.

But why 144,000? One possible interpretation is to think of this as referring to the conversion of Jews (as opposed to Gentiles) who are to be converted prior to a tribulation which emerges just before the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. The listing of the twelve tribes in verses 5-8 might seem to confirm this idea. The number 144,000 may then be taken literally or figuratively and may be linked to a similar interpretation of Romans 11, particularly verse 26, and the reference to "all Israel" being saved. Whether

the number be thought of as literal or figurative, this interpretation involves a depiction of Jewish-Christians *in this world*.

The problem with this interpretation is that the reference in verse 4 to seeing 144,000 is almost certainly paralleled with verse 9, where John sees, "a great multitude that no one could count." Verse 9 is introduced by the expression, "after these things" in the same way as verse 1, but we have already noted this does not necessarily imply chronological sequence, but merely the order in which the visions came to John. The number 144,000, then, is almost certainly a figurative way of expressing a very large number which is complete or fixed. Using the numbers 12 (representing all of the tribes of Israel, an allusion which ties in with verses 5-8, or more likely, the twelve tribes and twelve apostles representing the Old and New Testament church, cf. 21:9-10) and 10 or 1000 (a number of completeness) a quantity representing vastness is produced. Those who are sealed are "a great multitude that no-one could count from every nation, tribe, people and language." A seal is applied to every member of the kingdom, *before* any harm comes to the earth (7:3). It is the security echoed by the psalmist when he assures that "no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent" ([Psa. 91:10](#)), and "the Lord will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life" ([Psa. 121:7](#)).

If, as we have been suggesting, the 144,000 of verse 4 and the "great number which no one could count" of verse 9 are one and the same, then we need to ask why it is that detailed reference is given to the twelve tribes in verse 5-8? One possible answer would be that in detailing it in this way, Revelation is mimicking what the book of Numbers does in the Old Testament whenever it records a census of fighting men (cf. [Num. 1:21,23](#)). Revelation 7 is therefore recording in symbolic manner, an army of men who will fight for the Lamb and emerge from it victorious (7:14). These Christian soldiers emerge through the battle—there is no indication of a rapture away from it. In this way, the promise given to Abraham, that he would be the father of many nations ([Gen. 17:4-6](#)) is fulfilled. God's covenant of grace has now unfolded in all its multi-faceted dimensions. The beauty of the work of redemption has been disclosed.

In John's time, the church was small and to the world's estimation, insignificant. In many ages since, the church appears a dwindling community of no great significance. But in reality, what the Bible wants us to think of reality, the church is bigger than we can estimate, "a great multitude that no one could count" ([Rev. 7:9](#)). It takes us sweeping back through the Old Testament to the inaugural covenant with Abraham, when God beckoned him to count the stars, adding, "So shall your offspring be" ([Gen. 15:5](#)).

Their variety is underlined by the expression, "from every nation, tribe, people and language" (7:9; cf. 5:9; 11:9; 13:7; 14:10; 17:15). The gospel is to go into all the world. Jesus' last words on earth echoed it: "... you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" ([Acts 1:8](#)), a prophecy dramatically realized on the Day of Pentecost when men and women were gathered from all over the known world: "Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya and Cyrene; visitors from Rome...Cretans and Arabs" ([Acts 2:9-11](#)).

There is both a unity and diversity to the people of God. They come from *every* tribe: the mountain dwellers of northern tribes, the farmers of the dwellers of the great plains, to the coastal dwellers and fishermen that occupied the coastal cities of the Mediterranean—all are represented, and interestingly, in equal numbers! But, they are all of them, "servants of our God" (7:3), all are dressed in white (7:9; cf. [Isa. 18](#); [64:6](#); [Zech. 3:3-5](#)), all sing the same song of redemption (7:10).

What we have here is a picture of heaven, but a picture of heaven *now*! It is vertical eschatology as much as it is horizontal eschatology. This is the security of the church as it passes through present persecution and evil. God will guard and keep all his own. Everyone who is sealed will emerge victorious through the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

More happy, but not more secure
The glorified spirits in heaven.
Augustus M. Toplady

In heaven, where angels and the redeemed understand these things so much better, there is the unforgettable response of praise "to the Lamb" (7:10; cf. 5:12). The songs of earth have tried to mimic these sentiments:

Bearing shame and scoffing rude
In my place condemned He stood;
Sealed my pardon in his blood:
Hallelujah! What a Saviour!
Philip Paul Bliss

Turn then, my soul, unto thy rest;
The merits of thy great High Priest
Have bought thy liberty
Trust in His efficacious blood,
Nor fear thy banishment from God,
Since Jesus died for thee!
Augustus M Toplady

The Great Tribulation

Something interesting happens in verse 13. John who has so far been an observer finds himself there in heaven! One of the elders asks him a question. It is the question no doubt John had been asking himself! "These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?" The answer? "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation" (7:14). **What is the great tribulation?**

There is only one reference in the New Testament to "the great tribulation" outside of Revelation, and it occurs in the Olivet Discourse in [Matthew 24:21](#). Both references

undoubtedly pick up the language of [Daniel 12:1](#), "There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered."

If the way to be saved from the great tribulation is to make our robes white through the blood of the lamb (7:14), then we are already in the great tribulation. Tribulation is part of history generally. John began his letter by identifying himself as a fellow combatant in the "tribulation" ([Rev. 1:9](#), KJV; NIV has "suffering"). Peter warns that it is what the church is called upon to expect again and again in the pages of the New Testament ([1 Pet. 4:1-7](#), [12-13](#)). Paul uses the word over twenty times and on each occasion he is referring to the period of time that we are passing through right now. He suggests, in a most startling way, that it is through our participation in these sufferings (tribulations) that we fill up in our flesh, "what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions" ([Col. 1:24](#)). An exclusive placing of the "great tribulation" at the end of age is doubtful since the church at Thyatira is warned of its imminent arrival: Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds" ([Rev. 2:22](#), KJV). What John seems to depict here is the story of the church, emerging throughout history from one tribulation after another. It has always been so, and it ever will be until Jesus Christ brings it to a close by His coming.

Samuel Rutherford once wrote: "I find it most true, that the greatest temptation out of hell is to live without temptations. If my waters should stand, they would rot. Faith is the better of the free air, and of the sharp winter storm in its face. Grace withereth without adversity. The devil is but God's master fencer, to teach us to handle our weapons."

John had begun the chapter as an observer but closes it as a participant. He feels himself to be among those who are the sealed of God, praising His name, shepherded by Christ, drinking of the life-giving waters (7:15-17). His voice now mingles with theirs in praise of Jesus. He, with them, is in pain-free peace, singing and serving, secure in the knowledge that God has "spread His tent over them" (7:15; cf. [Lev 26:11-13](#)).

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