

Valley Bible Church – Book of Revelation

"The Saints of the Great Tribulation"

Revelation 7

Interlude #1: The Saints of the Great Tribulation

The first six seal judgments have been poured out upon the earth. The result is wide spread devastation and destruction. The unbelieving people of the world are in a state of widespread panic and terror. They recognize these judgments as coming from God, yet they still refuse to repent. Chapter 7 of Revelation forms an interlude between the sixth and seventh seal. It is here where John receives two visions of the saints of the Great Tribulation. The first vision is of the sealed of God and the second vision is of the great multitude of martyrs. This interlude serves the purpose of drawing a great contrast between the preparedness of the people of God who are delivered from the wrath and the panic of the unprepared people of the world. These visions which John receives here, answer the question of the people in panic from Revelation 6:17 where they say, "*for the great day of their wrath has come; and who is able to stand?*" So Revelation 7 serves as a parenthesis between the sixth and seventh seal to answer this question.

The Vision of the Sealed Saints: (7:1-8)

The phrase *after this* or *after these things* is used throughout Revelation with the term, *I saw* to signify a new vision (cf. 4:1, 7:1, 7:9, 15:5, 18:1, 19:1). John is receiving a new vision at this time which falls between the sixth seal judgment of 6:12-17 and the seventh seal revealed in 8:1.

John sees four angels standing at the four corners of the earth. The four corners of the earth do not refer to the earth as being flat, but is idiomatic of the four quadrants of the compass and thus means *north, south, east, and west*. Dr. Henry 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 corner. 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."²⁴²

These four angels are described as holding back the four winds of the earth, so that no wind would blow on the earth or on the sea or on any tree. The four winds are representative of God's judgment. This is not uncommon in Scripture (cf. Jer. 49:36, Dan. 7:2, Hos. 13:15). These winds of judgment are held back so that no wind would blow on the earth, sea or any tree. These winds representative of God's judgment would be freed during the 1st and 2nd trumpet judgments in Revelation 8 and will in fact harm both the earth and the sea and even the trees. "Holding back is from *krateo*, a strong word that suggests that the winds are struggling to break free from their restraint. The angelic restraining of the wind symbolizes the withholding of the plagues associated with the imminent

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trumpet judgments (8:5ff). So the next phase of God's wrath is restrained for the moment. The winds of judgment are gathering force, soon to be released."²⁴³

At this point in John's vision he sees another angel. Some have suggested that this angel is Christ. However, the term "another," "*allos*" is used of another of the same kind or another in a numerical sequence. Thus the angel here is of the same sort or character of the previous four angelic beings and cannot be Christ. This angel was ascending from the rising of the sun, simply stated as ascending from the east. "The angel had with him the seal of the living God. *Sphragis* (seal) often referred to a signet ring. 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)."²⁴⁴

This fifth angel cried out for the other four angels not to harm the earth, the sea, or the trees until the bond-servants of God had been sealed. God's judgment in the form of the trumpet and bowl judgments as represented by the four winds were being restrained by the four angels. These four angels were to continue to restrain or hold back this judgment until the completion of the sealing. These who were to be sealed were called bond-servants of God and thus can be identified as redeemed individuals. There is no identification to the form of this seal. The fact that the sealing takes place chronologically between the sixth and seventh seal judgment indicates that these individuals to be sealed will be protected during the last half of the tribulation not the first half as some have erroneously taught.

At this point John goes on to indicate the number of those who were sealed and their identity. The number of sealed individuals is 144,000. This is best understood in a literal way and not symbolic of anything else. It literally means 144,000 people will be sealed. This is further reinforced by the context of 12 listings of 12,000 individuals to be sealed. The identity of the sealed individuals are those who are sons of Israel. These are Jewish believers who are sealed. This refers to physical descendants from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Israel means Israel here. It is not symbolic of the church or of all believers during this time. 12,000 from every tribe of Israel will be sealed. Although the Jewish records of who was part of what tribe were lost during the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, we must recognize that our Sovereign God knows who is part of what tribe and is capable of sealing those whom he has determined to seal.

There are questions raised in the listing of the 12 tribes here. "It should be noted that there is no standard way of listing the twelve tribes. There are at least nineteen different ways of listing them in the Old Testament, none of which agree with the list given here."²⁴⁵

Dr. Robert Thomas notes:

"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)."²⁴⁶

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"Although there are 12 tribes listed in verses 5-8, some substitutions have been made. For example, Dan is eliminated and Levi is added to the list, while Ephraim is replaced by Joseph. Many reasons have been given for the substitutions. Most scholars believe that Dan and Ephraim were omitted because of their continual promotion of idolatry in Israel (1 Kings 12:28-30)."²⁴⁷ It is important to note that the Scriptures are silent as to the exact reason that Dan and Ephraim are replaced with Levi and Joseph here. The tribe of Dan was drawn into idolatry, while the tribe of Ephraim separated from Judah (Isa. 7:17) and like the tribe of Dan fell into idolatry (Hos. 4:17). This of course is only speculation, but it is the best guess as to the substitutions made here.

The Vision of the Martyred Saints: (7:9-17)

The phrase "*after these things*" used again here in verse 9 indicates that this is a new vision being described by John. This is a second and distinct vision from the one recorded in 7:1-8. The same word is used in the Greek for *I looked* as was used for *I saw* in verse 1. In fact the grammatical construction is the same and as mentioned earlier signifies a new vision which chronologically follows the previous one. "The vision thus introduced presents at least two contrasts with the previous one. In the former one there is a definite number of people, but in the latter an indefinite. In one the group is from the twelve tribes of Israel; in the other the crowd is from every nation."²⁴⁸

Their Description: John gives us a description of these saints in the first and last part of verse 9. They are described as a *great multitude which no one could count*. The emphasis here is on the fact that this multitude could not be counted. It was an innumerable group. They are also described as being from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue. They are not just Jewish but a mixture of Jews and Gentiles and from every people group across the world. "The phrase describes people from every culture, descent, race and language (cf. 5:9). It depicts the mass of humanity, crossing all barriers and dividing lines."²⁴⁹ They are lastly described as being *clothed in white robes*, and having *palm branches in their hands*. "*Leukos* (white) describes a dazzling, brilliant, shining white."²⁵⁰ "White robes in that day were marks of festival rejoicing associated with victory."²⁵¹ "Here the robes indicate not only victory in faith, but also the righteousness obtained through the death of Christ."²⁵² These are the same robes as given to the martyrs in 6:9-11 which suggests that they are part of the same group. "Palm branches were marks of festival rejoicing, especially in victory (cf. John 12:13)."²⁵³ "Palm branches are associated in Scripture with celebration, deliverance, and joy."²⁵⁴ (cf. Lev. 23:40, Neh. 8:15-17, John 12:13)

Their Location: "John saw this vast, uncountable crowd of victorious, joyous saints standing before the throne of God in heaven (cf. 4:2)... They are no longer seen under the altar praying for divine vengeance (cf. 6:9-11), which has already begun, but standing triumphantly before the throne of God."²⁵⁵

Their Action: The Greek word *krazousin* (cry out) is in the present tense and thus emphasizes the continuous action or occupation of this multitude. They never cease from crying out with a loud voice. They are crying out in joyful worship to God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb. *Soteria*, (salvation) is the theme of their worship. "The salvation spoken of is not their own achievement, but that of God and of the Lamb."²⁵⁶ God alone is recognized as the One responsible for salvation.

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The Surrounding Adoration: At this point in John's vision the picture is enlarged to reveal the entire scene in heaven. "The first group identified along with them in praise was all the angels who were standing around the throne. Their number, too was uncountable to John (cf. 5:11)." ²⁵⁷ "The angelic hosts join in rejoicing over the salvation wrought for men." ²⁵⁸ In addition to the great multitude and the angelic host were the 24 elders who are symbolic of the raptured church and the four living beings who were described as some sort of cherubim in service before God around His throne. The response of this group is similar to that in Revelation 4 and 5. They fall on their faces before the throne in reverence, worshiping God. "This is the appropriate reaction of all creatures, including those who are holy and perfect, to prostrate themselves in humble adoration before the unequalled glorious and majestic presence of the only true and holy God (cf. 4:10; 5:8, 14; 11:16; 19:14; Gen. 17:3; Lev. 9:24; Josh. 5:14; Judg. 13:20; 1 Kings 18:39; 2 Chron. 20:18; Ezek. 1:28; 3:23; Matt. 17:6; Phil. 2:9-10)." ²⁵⁹ "The two *amens* one before and one after the doxology, confess, confirm and seal what is spoken." ²⁶⁰ They attribute blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might to God forever and ever. This signifies the reality of a permanent ongoing worship of God throughout all eternity.

Their Identification: At this point the great multitude is more specifically identified. One of the elders who represent the raptured church asks John if he knows who this great multitude is. John pleads ignorance and the elder replies with the answer. "The question and answer format is often used in prophetic literature for introducing the explanation of a vision (cf. Zech. 4:5)." ²⁶¹ The elder confirms that this great multitude are those *who come out of the great tribulation*. This is not speaking of the raptured church but of the martyred tribulation saints. This is further confirmed by the following statement. *They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb*. This is a reference to Christ's sacrificial death which provided cleansing from sin for every believing sinner including those of the tribulation period.

Their Function: The function of this great multitude is that they would serve God before His throne in His temple day and night. "The term *latreuo* is a word often used to describe priestly service." ²⁶² "It reflects the spiritual worship of praise and adoration." ²⁶³ "Day and night is an idiom meaning unceasingly or without pause." ²⁶⁴ Revelation 22:3-5 informs us that there is no day or night in heaven.

Their Protection: The phrase *and He who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them*, is a beautiful picture and promise of God's protection over His own. "These believers will have witnessed unspeakable suffering and indescribable horrors as God's judgments were poured out on the world. They will have suffered terrible persecution at the hands of Antichrist and his followers. But when they enter God's presence, they will come to a heavenly sanctuary, the most secure place. There they will receive shelter from the terrors of the fallen world that are to come as God continues to unleash His devastating and destructive judgments." ²⁶⁵

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Their Provision: These believers will no longer know hunger or thirst. They will no longer have the sun beating down upon them. They will no longer have to endure the trials of the tribulation, but will be in the presence of their heavenly Shepherd who will care for them. The Scripture often refer to the role of The LORD as a Shepherd (cf. Ps. 23; 80:1; Isa. 40:11; Ezek. 34:23; John 10:11ff; Heb. 13:20; 1 Pet. 2:25; 5:4). He will care for them and comfort them. "Earthly privation is replaced with heavenly provision...Past sorrows will be replaced with eternal serenity."²⁶⁶

* Rev. 6:17: *for the great day of their wrath has come; and who is able to stand?* The saints of the Great Tribulation including the 144,000 sealed of God and the great multitude of martyred saints.