



Near the beginning of 2005, Chinese officials from the Public Security Bureau burst into a Sunday school room at a local chapter. They found 30 children inside and herded them into a van. Despite the scary situation, one child started to sing. In a few moments, the van was filled with song.

When they got to the police station, the children marched into the interrogation room, still singing to the Lord. The officers tried to force the children to write, "I do not believe in Jesus," telling them they had to write it 100 times to be released. Instead, the children wrote: "I believe in Jesus today. I'll believe in Jesus tomorrow. I'll believe in Jesus forever!"

The officials called the children's parents; some of them did deny Christ. But one widowed believer absolutely refused to deny Jesus when she came to pick up her twin sons. The officers threatened her, saying, "If you don't deny Jesus, we'll not release your sons."

The widow replied, "Well, I guess you'll just have to keep them, because without Jesus, there would be no way for me to take care of them!"

Finally, the officials gave up, saying, "Take your sons and go!"

This story brings up several questions that are relevant to our study of the book of Revelation. Revelation describes a situation where it seems all hell is breaking loose in the world and we wonder, what will this mean for God's people? Will God protect us? Will God somehow allow us to not just survive but to stand firm for him amidst all of this chaos?

Let me refresh your memory. In chapter 5 John had a vision of heaven where he saw a scroll in the right hand of him who sat on the throne. The scroll was sealed with seven seals. Inside the scroll was the future plan and purpose of God; a plan that included judgment on his enemies and victory for his faithful followers. Someone asked the question, "*Who is worthy to open the scroll?*" This was important. If the scroll wasn't opened the plan couldn't be carried out. So there was a search but no one was found worthy to open the scroll. John was so upset that he started to cry. But then one of the 24 elders who stood before the throne said to John, "*Stop weeping, behold, the lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the root of David, he's worthy to open the scroll and the seven seals.*" But when John looked he didn't see a lion; he saw lamb; a slain lamb. Through his own death on the cross, that lamb, Jesus, had overcome sin, death and the

devil, and because of that he could open the scroll and the plan of God could be carried forth.

In chapter 6 the lamb takes the scroll from him who sat on the throne and he began to open the seals one by one. The first four seals revealed four horsemen bringing conquest, war, famine and widespread death. The fifth seal revealed martyrs who stood for Christ during these terrible times and now cried out to God, "*How long, O Lord, will you refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?*" The answer came in the sixth seal. The sixth seal brings the end of the earth as we know it. There is a great earthquake, the sun becomes black and the stars fall to the earth. The people of the earth are terrified. As they hide among the rocks and in the caves they cry out, "*Fall on us and hide us from the presence of him who sits on the throne and from the lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come and who is able to stand?*"

Who is able to stand? That's a good question. These Chinese children were able to stand in a pretty difficult time, but this is even worse. You get the feeling here that no one will be able to stand. This is the wrath of God. This is judgment day. And one of the things we wonder is, what about God's people? How could God allow the events associated with his terrible wrath to be unleashed on his own dear children?

Revelation 7 answers this question. This chapter actually interrupts the sequence of opening the scrolls. Six seals have been broken; we're on the edge of our seat waiting for the opening of the seventh seal. But we have to wait. There is a pause between the opening of sixth and seventh seal. Why? Because in this pause we'll see what's happening in the unseen realm while all these awful things are happening in the seen realm. The visions of Revelation move between the seen world on earth and the unseen world in heaven. One of the purposes of the book is to open our eyes to these unseen realities of heaven. I've talked to a few of you who've been surprised by this aspect of Revelation. You expected everything to be about what was going to happen on earth. You didn't expect to hear so much about what's happening in heaven. But this is what we really need—to see the hidden realities in the unseen world. This is what Revelation 7 gives us. Who is able to stand? It's in the visible world the question is asked, but in the invisible world it's answered. And it's answered in a very simple way: the people who are able to stand are those who have been sealed.

God seals his bond servants on earth

“After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, 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. And I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God; and he 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 bond-servants of our God on their foreheads.’ And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel.” (Revelation 7:1–4).

God holds back destruction in order to seal his bondservants

Here we see John has another vision. By the way, this doesn't mean the events he sees in chapter 7 take place after the events of chapter 6. What John sees in chapter 7 parallels the intense tribulation described in chapter 6. The four winds and the four horsemen represent the same thing. In chapter 6 the four horsemen brought all kinds of terrible judgments. In the same way, these four winds have the power to harm the earth as instruments of judgment. But before that can happen, another angel comes forward and says they can't harm the earth; they can't let these tribulations take place until the bondservants of God are first sealed on their foreheads.

What does it mean to be sealed? The seal represents ownership: these people belong to God. In Revelation 14:1 God's people are sealed with the name of the lamb and the name of his Father written on their foreheads. It also represents protection: once they're sealed they can't be harmed. It's like in the Old Testament book of Ezekiel when a man clothed in linen is told to put a mark on the foreheads of God's faithful people before six executioners smite the city with God's wrath (Ez. 9:1–4). Or in Exodus when God sent the plagues upon Egypt; Israel was living there, but God drew a line of demarcation between the Egyptians and the Israelites so that only the Egyptians were harmed. This is the seal of ownership and protection. God protects that which he owns. When God sends these judgments on the earth during this time of tribulation, he'll protect his people.

144,000 from the twelve tribes are sealed

Who can stand? God's sealed bondservants can stand. But who are they? In v.4 John hears the number of 144,000 people from the 12 tribes of the sons of Israel who are sealed. He goes on in verses 5–8 to list the tribes.

“from the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand, from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand, from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand, from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand, from the tribe of

Manasseh twelve thousand, from the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand, from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand, from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand, from the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand, from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand, from the tribe of Benjamin, twelve thousand were sealed.”

12,000 will be sealed from each tribe. The list is a bit unusual. Reuben would normally be first because he was the firstborn, but Judah is first because from his tribe the Messiah came. Dan is missing, probably because his tribe was responsible for so much idolatry. Joseph is present but so is his son, Manasseh. Levi is in the list, even though normally he wasn't counted among the tribes because his was a tribe of priests.

Who are these 144,000? There are all kinds of different views on this. Of course, the Jehovah's Witnesses believe this is the actual number of Jehovah's Witnesses who will be saved. But among Christians there are different views as well. Some believe these were the Jewish believers who were able to escape Jerusalem while it was being destroyed in 70 AD.

Others, who believe in a pretribulation rapture of the church, say the church has already been removed from earth and raptured away to heaven. So these are Jewish people who come to Christ and witness for him during the Great Tribulation.

A third view is that these 144,000 represent God's people, both Jew and Gentile, who are alive during the last days and the Tribulation. This is my view. Notice they're simply called “bond-servants of our God” in v.3. That applies to both Jew and Gentile. The irregularity of the list also points to the fact that this isn't actual Israel, but spiritual Israel, whom Paul calls “the Israel of God” in Galatians. Finally, 144,000 is a symbolic number. 12 x 12,000 represents the totality of God's people. It's not a limiting number, as the Jehovah's Witnesses' take it, but an expansive number. How many are sealed? How many will be protected from God's wrath? All God's people! Not one will be lost!

Isn't that great news? God is looking out for his people! God won't allow anything to happen to us that he's not completely in control of. We've been sealed. In Ephesians Paul says we were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise when we first put our faith in Christ. This is the seal of ownership and protection. A lot of us fear the events associated with the end times. But, if you know Christ, you've been sealed, and if you've been sealed, nothing can harm you.

A true story is told of Frederick Nolan, a believer who was fleeing from his enemies during a time of intense persecution in North Africa. They chased him over hill and valley until he finally fell exhausted into a cave. He was expecting his pursuers to find him anytime and kill him. While he waited he noticed a spider weaving a web. Within minutes it had woven a beautiful web across the entrance of his cave. His pursuers got to the cave and

wondered if Nolan was there but when they saw the web they figured it would have been impossible for him to enter the cave without dismantling the web, so they left. When it was all over, Nolan said, "Where God is, a spider's web is like a wall; where God is not, a wall is like a spider's web."

God protects his people. But this raises a question. If God seals and protects us from harm, why do bad things so often happen to us? Frederick Nolan and those Chinese children were spared, but how many more have been killed for taking a stand? Even in chapter 6 we saw the martyrs who'd been killed because of their witness for Christ, crying out for God to avenge their blood.

God blesses his bond servants in heaven

This may very well be why John had another vision where he saw another group in verses 9-12.

"After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.' 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, saying, 'Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever Amen.'"

A great multitude worship before God and the lamb

John had just heard of the 144,000 from the tribes of Israel. As he looks up, what does he expect to see? He expects to see 144,000 people. But instead, he sees something else. This is like what happened in Revelation 5 when John heard of the Lion of the tribe of Judah. He looked up, expecting to see a lion, but instead he saw a lamb. The truth is that the lion is also a lamb. In the same way, John isn't seeing two different groups here, but only one. He hears the 144,000 but when he looks he sees this great multitude. They are one in the same. The 144,000 are this great multitude, which no one can count, from every nation, tribe and tongue.

This is a fulfillment of a promise made to Abraham. On a dark, cloudless night God led Abraham to stand under the ancient sky. He said, **"Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars. That's how many descendants you'll have."** (Gen. 15:5). It's true many Jews descended physically from Abraham and his children. But this promise goes much deeper than that. Galatians says, **"If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring"** (Gal. 3:29). So this promise looks at all of God's people from every tribe and tongue as Abraham's seed.

Here they're pictured as clothed in white robes of purity and victory, just like the martyrs back in chapter 6. The palm branches they carry signify joy. The Lord told the Israelites **"to take palm branches and rejoice before the Lord your God"** (Lev 23:40). Jesus entered Jerusalem as the crowds waved palm branches and shouted, **"Hosanna!"** (Jn 12:13).

Then they cry out in worship. We've seen the four living creatures and the 24 elders worship God and the Lamb. But now the chorus increases as people join in. They sing of a salvation that comes from God and the Lamb. It doesn't come from their own strength. It doesn't come from the dragon, the beast or the false prophet. It doesn't come from Rome or Caesar. It doesn't come from their education, their job, their bank accounts or their position in society. Salvation belongs only to God and the Lamb. Only they're worthy of this sevenfold tribute: blessing, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honor, power and might.

By the way, did you see what they're doing? They're standing! Who is able to stand? Well, I guess they are!

An elder identifies the multitude for John

"Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, 'These who are clothed in the white robes, who are they, and where have they come from?' I said to him, 'My lord, you know'" (verses 13-14a).

As John listens to this awesome worship, he's questioned by one of the elders. He asks John who are these worshippers standing before the throne? I doubt he needed to know. He'll answer his own question shortly. The reason he asks the question is so John will want to know the answer and ask the question himself. Sometimes our problem isn't that we don't know the right answers, but that we don't know the right questions. So this elder helps him out. He wants to make sure John knows. This is an important question, agreed? If you and I want to be among that multitude we're going to have to know the answer to this question. Who are these people? How can I make sure that I'm among them?

Who are they? **"And he said to me, 'These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb'"** (v.14b). The elder says two things about them. First, they've come out of the great tribulation. In other words, they survived it. But that doesn't mean nothing happened to them. Remember they are now seen in heaven before the throne of God. They may have very well been martyred and then gone to heaven. God can set his seal of ownership and protection on you and yet you still die a martyr's death. We're protected against the wrath of the lamb, but not necessarily from persecution and even death at the hands of the lamb's enemies. But all they can do is kill us. Remember, Revelation speaks of two deaths. The first death is physical; the second is spiritual. We all have to go through the first death; but

the second death is only for those who reject Christ. It's not the first death we're afraid of, but the second death. A poet wrote,

*Safe shall be my going,
Secretly armed against all death's endeavor;
Safe where all safety's lost; safe where men fall;
And if these poor limbs die, safest of all.*

These are the ones who have come out of the great tribulation, but not only that, the elder says they've "**washed their robes in the blood of the lamb.**" It sounds rather strange. The last thing you would wash a dirty piece of clothing in is blood. But this is a picture of the blood of Christ which cleanses us and purifies us from sin. If you want to be among that great multitude you have to trade your own dirty robes for those white robes washed in his blood. That's how you avoid the second death. That's how you get sealed. You wash your dirty robes in the blood of the lamb!

An elder describes how they are blessed

The elder in John's vision can't control himself. He goes on and describes the blessings these saints will enjoy. He provides one of the most beautiful depictions of life in heaven in all the Bible. This is like a banana split with three different toppings.

"For this reason, they are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them. They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat, for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes" (verses 15–17).

He says we shall be before the throne and serve him day and night in the temple. We're seen here as priests who serve God in the temple day and night. Later in Revelation we learn that there really is no day and night in heaven, so this is just a way of saying this is our continuous occupation. We also know that in heaven there is no literal temple because "**the Lord God Almighty and the lamb are its temple**" (Rev. 21:22). Imagine living in the presence of God, with unfiltered access to him.

Then he says he'll spread his tabernacle over us. The tabernacle was the symbol of the presence of God as Israel wandered through the wilderness. Later, John speaks of the new Jerusalem this way: "**Now the dwelling of God is with his people, and he will live with them**" (21:3). Add to that this picture of his "**spreading his tent**" over us and we see his presence will be our protection and comfort. This is the ultimate safety net. Never again will we have to fear harm or misfortune.

Finally, he says there will be no more hunger, thirst, or sun beating down on us. All our needs will be met. Why? Because the lamb will be our shepherd; he will guide us to springs of water, and he will wipe away every tear from our eye. Normally a lamb needs a shepherd; but this lamb we know as Jesus is our shepherd. We long for guidance. Sometimes we feel lost. But not in heaven. He'll guide us to springs of the water of life. We'll never thirst; never hunger. This is life in all its fullness; the life we long to have, but only get a small taste of now. In that day, we will be able to sing the Psalm of David:

*The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want
He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters.
He restores my soul;
He guides me in the paths of righteousness
For His name's sake.*

But in that day, there will be no walking through the valley of the shadow of death, and we'll fear no evil because there will be no evil to fear. Only goodness and lovingkindness will follow us all the days of our lives, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. That's the message of the book of Revelation. Jesus wins! And those whom he seals will not only be protected from his wrath, but even if we die as martyrs, we'll win with him.

Who is able to stand? When God unleashes his judgments on the earth, who will be able to survive the wrath of the lamb? The message of Revelation 7 that those who are sealed will be able to stand. And those who are sealed are those from every tribe and tongue and nation who have washed their robes in the blood of the lamb and come out of the Great Tribulation because they do not love their lives even unto death.

It's Thanksgiving weekend and look what this is telling us to be thankful for. Look at the feast God has prepared. Look at the table he has set before us. We who bear the seal of God's ownership and protection...

- will stand before the throne of God, serving Him in His temple.
- He who sits on the throne spreads His tabernacle over us
- we shall hunger and thirst no more,
- neither shall the sun beat down on us, nor any heat;
- for the Lamb in the center of the throne is our shepherd,
- and he shall guide us to springs of the water of life
- and God shall wipe every tear from our eyes.

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