

Lesson 17

Last week when we ended we were discussing verses 12-17 of Chapter 6. Those verses describe a judgment by God — but which judgment? That was the question we were considering when the class ended.

A **surface approach** to the book would likely answer that this **must** be the final judgment at the end of the world. **But why must it?** We looked at numerous examples last week in which this very same language was used to describe past judgments of God, including the judgment against Jerusalem that occurred shortly before this book was written. If the language there is not describing the end of the world, then why must the same language here be describing the end of the world?

A **better approach** is to ask the same questions that have carried us through Daniel, Zechariah, and now through Revelation — what is the context and what is the time frame? We already know the answers to those two questions. The context comes from Chapters 2 and 3 — it is the Roman persecution of God's people in the first century. The martyrs that we saw earlier in this same chapter had been killed by Rome because of their testimony about Jesus. And the time frame? We saw last week that this book states very clearly seven times that the events in the book were to occur soon.

There is no reason to suddenly leap thousands of years into the future at the end of the Chapter 6 — and there is every reason not to do that. The vivid language of judgment that we find here is used all throughout the Bible to describe various judgments by God — we just need to examine the context and the time frame to determine which judgment is being discussed here. When we do, we will find that Rome is still in view here. The text is telling us that Rome's day of judgment is coming soon!

The judgment of Rome is the **immediate** fulfillment of the prophecies in these verses. But could there be another **future** fulfillment? Could we be seeing a prophecy here that has a dual fulfillment? The answer is yes, we **could** be, but we can't say that for sure. All that we can say for sure from the text is that the immediate fulfillment was the judgment of Rome.

Why can't we say for sure whether there is a dual fulfillment? After all, we know for a fact that some prophecies in the Old Testament had dual fulfillments — one immediate and another yet future. Yes, we know that — **but**

how do we know that? We know that because the Bible tells us there was a dual fulfillment. We will see an example of that in the next chapter.

Here is the **key point**: yes, there are some dual prophecies in the Bible, but the only reason we know that is because the inspired text told us about both fulfillments. Absent that divine guidance, we can only speculate about whether there is a second fulfillment in view.

Are we seeing prophecies in this book of Revelation with dual fulfillments — one immediate fulfillment as to the judgment of Rome, and a second yet future fulfillment as to the final judgment? **Perhaps**, but the text does not tell us that, so we can only state that as an opinion.

Last week we mentioned that **literal** past events or places can provide the basis for symbols in this book — such as Israel, Egypt, and Babylon. Just as symbols can be based on literal **past** events, symbols can also be based on literal **future** events.

Some day the earth will literally be destroyed by fire, and the heavens will literally be rolled up like a scroll — and God sometimes uses those literal future events associated with the final judgment as symbols to depict these earlier judgments. These earlier judgments serve as **reminders** of the great judgment that will someday come to the entire world. Is it more than a reminder? Is it in fact a prophecy with a dual fulfillment? Perhaps, but we must leave it there. We cannot be dogmatic about a second fulfillment when the text has not told us that a second fulfillment is in view.

The search for a hiding place in verse 16 is also seen in Isaiah 2, which describes the reaction of the ungodly at the establishment of the eternal kingdom in Acts 2.

Isaiah 2:19 — And they shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of his majesty, when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth.

The message is clear: there is no place to hide from God. It is interesting to watch the ungodly trying to **hide** in a book entitled **Revelation! God reveals! The ungodly hide!**

Swete: “What sinners fear most is not death, but the revealed presence of God.”

The “**wrath of the Lamb**” in verse 16 is one of the most remarkable and most terrifying expressions and most vivid pictures found anywhere in the Bible. The word “wrath” is applied to Jesus only one time in the gospels.

***Mark 3:5** — And when he had looked round about on them with **anger**, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts, he saith unto the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it out: and his hand was restored whole as the other.*

We see the same word also in John 3.

***John 3:36** — He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the **wrath** of God abideth on him.*

We all know what makes God happy. But it is just as important that we all know what makes God angry!

C.S. Lewis: “In the end that face which is the delight or the terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or with the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be cured or disguised.”

There is no middle ground in that verse we read from John 3:36. On that last day, each person will either receive eternal life or wrath. Verse 17 in this context is describing the judgment of Rome, but the message could apply to any judgment from God, including the final judgment: “For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?” The answer of course is no one. It is only in Christ that anyone can stand.

***Romans 14:4** — Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand.*

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 is an interlude between the sixth seal and the seventh seal. It is intended to provide comfort to the church and to reassure the church that they will be victorious over Rome if they remain faithful unto death.

Chapter 7 answers the question that appeared at the end of Chapter 6: Who can stand before the wrath of God?

As we will see, Revelation 7 is modeled after Ezekiel 9, which describes a judgment that was to come against Judah from Babylon. In Ezekiel 9, God's people are marked so that they would be untouched when judgment came. Did that mean they experienced a **physical deliverance** from suffering? No, because in Ezekiel 21:3-4 we see that the righteous died as well as the guilty when that judgment came. Their deliverance was **spiritual** rather than physical. Yes, they suffered, but they were not among those for whom that suffering was a judgment and a punishment.

There is a vast difference between suffering **with** the guilty and suffering **because** you are guilty, even though admittedly at the time there may not appear to be much of a difference to the one who is suffering. But the difference is real, and the difference is clear from God's perspective, which is the perspective revealed to us in this book.

When we think of patience in suffering, we think of Job, and there are some remarkable parallels between the book of **Revelation** and the book of **Job**.

- In each, Satan plays a key role as an accuser of God's people.
- In each, God's people suffer at the hands of Satan, but that suffering is not punishment and is not permanent.
- In each, God allows that suffering to continue for a little time.
- In each, a key theme is the sovereignty of God.
- In each, a key theme is that things are not always what they seem.
- In each, there is a happy ending for the people of God.

Revelation 7:1-3

1 And after these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, nor on the sea, nor on any tree. 2 And I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God: and he cried with a loud voice to the four angels, to whom it was given to hurt the earth and the sea,

3 Saying, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads.

The number **four** is mentioned four times in these verses. As we have seen, the number four is a symbol for the created world — the four elements, the four directions, the four seasons. Sometimes this symbol is used in a subtle way. In 5:12 when **heaven** praises Christ, it is with a **seven**-fold blessing. Later in 5:13, when the **earth** praises Christ, it is with a **four**-fold blessing. When we see the number four, as we do here, we should expect to see something about the created world.

What does it mean in verse 1 to hold back the four winds? A wind is both powerful and invisible, and so a wind is often used to denote the activity of God.

***Jeremiah 18:17** — I will scatter them as with **an east wind** before the enemy; I will shew them the back, and not the face, in the day of their calamity.*

***Psalms 18:10** — And he rode upon a cherub, and did fly: yea, he did fly upon the wings of the **wind**.*

By holding back the four winds, these four angels are holding back God's judgments against his creation. The judgment will come when the angels let loose the wind. **How soon will the judgment occur?** Well, how long can the wind be held back? The image used here denotes something that will occur **soon**.

Another angel appears in verse 2 on an errand of mercy, and this angel comes from the east. Other translations have "from the rising of the sun," which is what the Greek word used here literally means. The sun is often used to represent the goodness of God.

***Psalms 84:11** — For the Lord God is a **sun** and shield.*

***Malachi 4:2** — But unto you that fear my name shall the **Sun** of righteousness arise with healing in his wings.*

This book is all about revelation, and nothing reveals like the sun! Evil hides in darkness, but sunlight dispels darkness. This angel arriving from the rising sun is bringing good news from God for the people of God!

In verse 3, a call for delay is given. If nothing in this book was going to happen for 2000 years, then why would a call for delay be needed? Is that the picture we see here — a long slow process that will take millennia to even get started? Or do we instead see something that is about to happen, so soon in fact that it is like holding back a strong wind? So soon, that there must be a call for a delay.

Why the delay in verse 3? The judgment is delayed until the righteous are marked or sealed in their foreheads. This is where Revelation 7 starts to look a bit like Ezekiel 9.

*Ezekiel 9:4-6 — And the Lord said unto him, Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and **set a mark** upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof. And to the others he said in mine hearing, Go ye after him through the city, and smite: let not your eye spare, neither have ye pity: Slay utterly old and young, both maids, and little children, and women: but come not near any man upon whom is the mark; and begin at my sanctuary. Then they began at the ancient men which were before the house.*

This entire scene is a reminder of something we have already seen frequently in this book: **God knows!** Seven times in the seven letters Jesus said, “**I know.**” The church thought they had been forgotten. The church thought that God did not know what Rome was doing to them. Wrong! God knows! **And that fact should bring comfort to the godly and fear to the ungodly — both then and today!**

*2 Timothy 2:19 — Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, **having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his.** And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.*

Is there a more **comforting** verse in the Bible than that one? Is there a more **challenging** verse for the people of God? The foundation is sure! The Lord knows them that are his! Let those who belong to Jesus depart from iniquity! There are a thousand sermons in that one verse.

God knows his people. In an earthly kingdom, everyone knows the king, but the king does not know everyone. That is not how it is in the heavenly kingdom. God knows every single person.

God knows them that are his. And that fact is shown in this chapter to provide comfort and assurance to those who were being persecuted — to those who were wondering if God had forgotten about them. God had not forgotten. God knows.

What is the **seal** in verses 2-3? Is it the Holy Spirit? Some say yes, and point to Ephesians.

***Ephesians 1:13** — In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise.*

But we need to be careful here. These people in Revelation 7 were already saved before they received the seal in verses 2-3. They were receiving the seal to show that they were God's people; not to make them God's people. They were already faithful Christians. They had already received the gift of the Holy Spirit that was promised in Acts 2:38 and Acts 5:32. They had already received the seal of Ephesians 1:13 and 2 Timothy 2:19.

So then does that mean the seal here is **not** the Holy Spirit? No, and that is why we have to be careful. I think we are seeing something here that we have seen before in this book and that we will see again in this book — these people are being shown as receiving something they already possessed! Why? Because they had forgotten what it means. Because they needed to be reminded of what it means. Because God wanted them to see it in a new light. Because God wanted the rest of the world to see it and understand what it means. Because it was about to be made manifest to them and to the world in a new way.

This seal in Chapter 7 is a **reminder**. It is a reminder of a relationship these Christians already had with God, but they were not seeing properly. If they thought God had forgotten about them, then they did not understand how God sees them. So what does God do here? **God shows them how he sees them — and God shows us today how he sees us!**

So how does God see them? Just as we write our name on things that are important to us and that we don't want to lose, God has written his name (he has set his seal) on his people. God has marked his people to reassure them that

he knows who they are and that they belong to him. Not one will be misplaced or stolen.

So is the seal the Holy Spirit? I think that it is. I think that is the function of the non-miraculous indwelling of the Holy Spirit — it is how God writes his name on his faithful children. It is given as a seal. That is precisely what we are told in Ephesians 1:13.

There has long been a difference of opinion in the church on whether the Holy Spirit dwells in a Christian only through the word or separately apart from the word. So long as we can agree that the Holy Spirit does not dwell miraculously in a person (in the sense that the Holy Spirit gives that person supernatural guidance, insight, or abilities), then that disagreement is just a matter of opinion on which we can differ.

My view is that the Holy Spirit does dwell apart from the word, but the Holy Spirit does not work apart from the word. But I have often encountered an objection to that view: if the Holy Spirit dwelling in me doesn't do anything apart from the Word, then why do we have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us? What is the purpose? **The verses we are looking at now answer that question** — the Holy Spirit is how God marks those who are his.

And just think for a moment about what that means. Do we see ourselves as God's special possession — “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people” (1 Peter 2:9)? What if there were a visible mark on our foreheads that we could see and the rest of the world could see. Would that visible mark help us live a righteous life? Would it make us less likely to sin, knowing that the world could see that mark from God upon us?

Well, we have that mark! We have that seal! And if the world can't see that mark from God on our lives, then that is not a reflection upon God, but rather a reflection upon us. **The seal of the Holy Spirit in a Christian's life should be as visible to the world as a mark on our forehead! That was certainly true of the Apostle John.**

*Acts 4:13 — Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled; and they took knowledge of them, **that they had been with Jesus.***

And so I suppose having this special mark from God will protect us from persecution, right? No! **In fact, it will cause more persecution.** The mark from God

promises spiritual deliverance, not physical deliverance — and we know that very often those two types of deliverance are opposite to each other.

Matthew 16:25 — For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.

Revelation 2:10 — Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.

Soon we will meet people in this book who are wearing someone else's mark — the mark of the beast. And make no doubt about it — **everyone then and everyone today is wearing someone's mark.**

Romans 6:16 — Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?

There is no one walking around not wearing a mark. The only question is whose mark are you wearing? Caesar or Christ?

But if I can't see the mark of God on myself, how do I know that it is there? Have you heard the gospel? Have you obeyed the gospel by believing, confessing, repenting, and being baptized for the remission of your sins? Are you living a life of faithfulness to God? Then you have that mark on you. And if you answered yes to all of those questions, then that mark is more visible than you may think it is!

Revelation 7:4-8

4 And I heard the number of them which were sealed: and there were sealed an hundred and forty and four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel. 5 Of the tribe of Juda were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Reuben were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Gad were sealed twelve thousand. 6 Of the tribe of Aser were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe

of Nephtalim were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Manasses were sealed twelve thousand. 7 Of the tribe of Simeon were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Levi were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Issachar were sealed twelve thousand. 8 Of the tribe of Zabulon were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Joseph were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Benjamin were sealed twelve thousand.

Are numbers use figuratively in this book? Look at verses 5-8. 12000! 12000! 12000! 12000! 12000! 12000! 12000! 12000! 12000! 12000! We see the number 12,000 mentioned twelve times in those four verses. **What do we think?** Is it possible that God is trying to tell us something by using the number twelve? Is think it is more than possible; I think it is unavoidable. The number twelve is found twenty two times in this book, more times than in all but one other book of the Bible. (First Chronicles uses it twenty six times.)

I don't know about you, but when I see a premillennialist taking these numbers literally, I picture God just shaking his head! "By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive" (Matthew 13:14). Numbers are used **symbolically** in this book — verses 4-8 leave no other reasonable option. And if these numbers here are symbols, on what basis can anyone claim in a later chapter that the number one thousand is literal?

Who are the 144,000 in verse 4 who were sealed? Don't panic (and the exits are clearly marked!), but some mathematics is needed here. Square roots and cube roots are needed to understand this symbol!

The number twelve is the symbol for God's people (twelve patriarchs, twelve tribes, twelve apostles), and twelve squared is 144, where the power of two may denote the righteous under both covenants. The number ten is the symbol for completeness (ten fingers, ten toes), and one thousand is ten raised to the power of three, the symbol for divinity. What that means is that several sym-

bols are wrapped up in the number 144,000 — symbols for God’s people, for the old and new covenant, for completeness, and for God.

What is it that contains the all of the righteous people of God, both those who lived and died under the old covenant prior to the death of Christ and those who lived or are living under the new covenant after the death of Christ? What else could it be? It is the eternal kingdom of God, the church. What we are seeing here is yet another beautiful image for the church.

Do you mean to say that the righteous people of God who lived under the old covenant are in the church? Absolutely! Where else would they be? The church is the body of the saved.

What does Ephesians 2:20 say about the church? It says that the church is “built upon the foundation of the apostles **and prophets**, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone.” Not only are the Old Testament prophets in the church, they are part of the foundation of the church!

So back to the 144,000 in these verses. Let’s approach that number from another angle by asking this question: **How many of God’s people were sealed?**

Before we answer that question, let’s ask this question: **what would we expect the answer to be?** What would the initial persecuted first century readers of this book, seeking comfort, have expected the answer to be? How many of God’s faithful people would they have expected God to write his name on? There is only one answer that makes any sense — **all** of God’s people!

That is what they would have expected the answer to be, and that is the only answer that would have provided them comfort and assurance. And guess what? **THAT IS THE ANSWER!** That is what the symbol of 144,000 depicts — **ALL OF GOD’S PEOPLE** with not a single one left out!

But, some might object, if God meant “all” here, why didn’t he just say “all”? Why use 144,000 if he meant “all”? Well, we could just as easily ask this question: Why is the book of Revelation so long? Why didn’t God just say, “You win!”? Couldn’t the entire book have been reduced to that? Yes, but that is not how God decided to convey that message. Instead, God gave us this beautiful book filled with symbols, and God gave us brains so we could understand them.

How much comfort is there in these verses if we take 144,000 literally, as so many do today? Can we really imagine God turning to the poor, persecuted Christian wearing the number 144,001 on his chest and saying “Sorry, but

you're out of luck. You're a day late, and a dollar short! Better luck next time ... if there were going to be a next time!" **How ridiculous!** The so-called rigid literalism of the premillennialist strips all of the beauty and meaning out of the text! **God's message to the 144,001st Christian is the same as his message to the 144,000th Christian!** "God is no respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34).

So, how many of God's people were sealed? We would expect the answer to be that **all** of God's people were sealed. We would expect to hear that not one of God's children was left out. We would expect to hear that he was marking **all** of his possessions. **And that is exactly what we are told here!** The number 144,000 is a beautiful symbol for **all** of God's people. The number 144,000 is God's way of emphasizing that **all** of his people are under his care and protection — which is just what we would expect him to say!

The 144,000 are mentioned again in 14:1-5, where they are described as virgins and are said to be those redeemed from mankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb. Does that later description from Chapter 14 help us here with the 144,000 in Chapter 7? Yes. It confirms what we are saying here.

In 2 Corinthians 11:2, Paul said he wanted to present the Corinthian church as a chaste virgin to Christ. James 1:18 says that we are "a kind of first fruits of his creatures." The church consists of those who have been redeemed from mankind. The church is sealed with the name of God and the Lamb.

***Revelation 3:12** — Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name.*

The descriptions of the 144,000 in both Chapter 7 and Chapter 14 confirm that the number 144,000 depicts the church.

But why are they called **Israelites** in these verses? That's simple. Israel is an established name for God's people. The name Israel literally means "he who prevailed with God." Could there be a better description for those in the church, and particularly for the persecuted first century Christians? As we discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, the church is the true Israel. The church is the new Jerusalem.

But what about the names of the tribes listed here. Why include all of these names in the text? Is there a reason? Is there anything unusual about this list?

Yes, there is a reason, and yes, there is something unusual about the list. **In fact, this list of names reaffirms a central theme of the book: Caesar or Christ.** How?

We know that Jacob had twelve sons, but we also know that only eleven sons received a tribal inheritance. The tribe of Levi instead received 48 cities that were scattered among the other tribes. The tribe of Joseph was split into two tribes named for his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. So, when the tribes are listed in the Bible the list generally **omits** Levi and Joseph and **includes** Ephraim and Manasseh instead. But that is **not** the case here.

In fact, the list is unusual in several respects. First, Judah rather than Reuben (the oldest son) heads the list. Why? That's easy. Christ is the Lion of Judah. Christ came from the tribe of Judah. This book is all about Jesus, and so Judah rather than Reuben starts off this list.

But, second, Manasseh and Joseph are **both** included even though Manasseh was Joseph's son. And Levi is included on the list. And who is left off the list? Joseph's other son, Ephraim, and Dan are left off the list. **For some reason the inspired text has very deliberately omitted Ephraim and Dan.** Why? One word: **idolatry.**

The tribe of Dan was very early connected with idolatry in the Bible:

***Judges 18:30** — And the children of Dan set up the graven image.*

***1 Kings 12:28-29** — Whereupon the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold, and said unto them, It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem: behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. And he set the one in Bethel, and the other put he in Dan.*

***Genesis 49:17** — Dan shall be a serpent by the way, an adder in the path, that biteth the horse heels, so that his rider shall fall backward.*

Rome was full of idolatry, and so was Dan. Dan was the classic example of a tribe that compromised with the world. Dan chose Caesar over Christ. And so Dan was not used here in this beautiful description of the church.

And why was Ephraim left out? For the same reason:

***Hosea 4:17** — Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone.*

Hosea 12:1 — Ephraim feedeth on wind, and followeth after the east wind: he daily increaseth lies and desolation; and they do make a covenant with the Assyrians, and oil is carried into Egypt.

Ephraim had forsaken God and had instead tried to make deals with the world. Ephraim made a covenant with Assyria, and at the same time was making deals with Egypt. They were joined to idols. Just like Dan, Ephraim was guilty of compromise, and just like Dan, Ephraim was left out of this beautiful description of the church.

So why are the tribes listed here by name? We just answered that question. The names of the tribes are listed here so that God could give us a lesson about compromise with the world. These names were listed so that we would notice the absence of Dan and Ephraim, and ask ourselves why.

This description teaches us several things about how we must approach this book if we hope to properly understand it. **First**, it shows us that numbers are symbolic in this book. **Second**, it shows us that we can't understand this book apart from the Old Testament. And **third**, it shows us that we can't understand this book just by skimming the surface of the text, picking out a few verses here and there. We need to dive deeply into God's word — and when we do, what wonderful treasures we will find!

Psalm 119:162 — I rejoice at your word as one who finds great treasure.