

Interlude: Who is Able to Stand the Great Day of His Wrath?

Call to Worship: Psalm 121

Hymn #17 (supp)- *Blessed Assurance*

1st Scripture: Revelation 14

Hymn #26 (supp)- *Now I Belong to Jesus*

2nd Scripture: Revelation 7

Hymn Insert- *When We All Get to Heaven*

Introduction:

Last time, we saw how the worthy Lamb of God, the Lamb who was slain, began to open the scroll (which He had taken out of the right hand of God), so that its contents might be revealed and enacted. Our Lord broke six of the seven seals, revealing the general hardships and terrifying desolations that would come upon the earth for the entire duration of the church age. There would be conquest, there would be war, there would be famine, there would be scarcity of staple necessities, there would be pestilence, there would be disease and death continually spread across the earth all throughout New Covenant history. This world would offer no lasting peace to its inhabitants. And we also saw that these things would affect Christians, as well as non-Christians, the former, as a means of furthering their sanctification in Christ. And Christians would suffer persecution and oppression, and even death at the hands of the enemies of Christ, as a response to their faithful witness. But in due time, their prayers of vindication would be heard, and all the world will know that these martyrs are beloved and faithful, children of God. And when the last martyr has been killed, Christ Himself will return and bring judgment upon the world, such that all who do not know Him in truth, will run to the mountains and the hills, pleading with them to fall upon them, so that they might somehow escape the wrath of the Lamb. But they will find no such escape. And there will be earthquakes, there will be signs in the sky, and the heavens and the earth will shake with great rigor, and everyone whose hope is bound to this world will be undone, full of terror and without any *true* hope whatsoever. And in the vision, these fleeing lost, condemned immortal souls, shout aloud, “For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?”

And now, as we enter chapter seven, our Lord provides John with another two-fold vision; an interlude, preceding the breaking of the last seal, which is meant to answer that very

question. You see, the end of chapter six presents us with the terrifying judgment that is to come upon the wicked, and the wicked themselves pose that final question, as they are left without any hope whatsoever. But this is meant to encourage and forewarn us; it is a gracious blessing given by God to His churches, so that we can be prepared to stand and face that great day without any fear; in fact, with great joy and delight, when it comes upon us! You see, chapter seven tells us that there are some who can and will stand the great Day of Christ's wrath! The hopeless cry, expressed at the end of chapter six will not be the plight of everyone. There are some who are able to stand! There are some who will escape that most terrifying and agonizing eternal judgment. And John is now carried away into a vision, describing those who indeed can and will stand!

And there are two parts to this vision. The first part, given in verses 1-8, presents us with the church militant, or the *true* church (or spiritual Israel) of our Lord, as it stands on earth, scattered throughout the world in various local churches. This represents the church enduring and going through the great tribulation. And the second part, given in verses 9-17, presents us with the church triumphant, or the church, gathered together as one full body in heaven. This represents the church, having already faithfully gone through the great tribulation, and now at rest in glory with Christ! And so, for this morning then, we will consider these two viewpoints of Christ's church. For, they alone will overcome, and be ushered into glory with Christ!

I. The Church Militant (in battle, on earth)

[Read again verses 1-8]

After seeing the visions that have come about through the opening of the first six seals, in response to the final question posed by the wicked at the end of the sixth seal, John sees four angels standing at the four corners (or the compass points) of the earth. And these angels are preparing to bring about that final destruction, which is to come upon the heavens and the earth, when God is to bring an end to this world. But these angels are held back; they are delayed from releasing the destructive "winds" until the people of God are sealed. They cannot destroy the earth until all of God's chosen people (His elect) are sealed and protected, so that they can and will stand the Day of Christ's wrath. Now before we talk a little more about this "sealing" that

takes place, it is important to note a significant fact about the specific people who are being sealed here. For, they are described in verse 4 as, “One hundred and forty-four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel...” Many have debated about *who* exactly these 144,000 are. Are they literal Israelites; a select group of Jews among the whole of Israel? Are they a group that is spared at the end time, among those who are living in the world? Or does this represent *spiritual* Israel (the true church) in some sense? Well, judging by the fact that the whole book of Revelation is laden with symbols, we can presume first that this is probably symbolic in nature as well. In other words, it would be out of sync with the whole of the Book, to all of a sudden take this vision in a literal sense. Revelation is apocalyptic in nature, and in the case of this style of writing, it is better to assume that we are dealing with symbols as a first principle, in all of the visions (“What really is” in light of what “Seems to be”—true Israel). But even aside from that, there are key factors given in the vision (and outside of it), which would tell us that this is not meant to represent *ethnic* Israel, but rather it is meant to represent *spiritual* Israel or the church, as she is set apart to endure all tribulation, and alone able to stand through the final judgment and destruction of the world. Notice some key factors that would prove this:

1) The listing of the tribes given here is clearly not identical to the order given in the Old Testament listing of the twelve tribes of Israel. This is very significant and intentional. Notice, the tribe of Judah has replaced Reuben as the privileged firstborn over this group. Beyond the shadow of any doubt, this is listed as such because Judah is the firstborn *not* of ethnic Israel but of *spiritual* Israel. Christ, the Lion of the tribe of Judah and the root of David, has Himself elevated Judah to this privileged position. He is the firstborn from the dead, and the Head of the church. And that is why Judah is listed first here.

2) But notice as well that after Reuben (the firstborn of *ethnic* Israel), the list continues with Gad, then Asher, then Naphtali, rather than Simeon and Levi...etc. Why is this? Interestingly enough, these three were three of the four sons born to Bilhah and Zilpah, who were the maidservants of Rachel and Leah. And the first two of these, namely, Gad and Asher were born to the concubine belonging to the less favorable Leah. Well, these three are brought up to the top of the order, but why? I believe that this is intentionally done as a means of showing that those who ought to have been most distant (those born of the concubines) were given a special priority in the kingdom of God. This is a clear indication, meant to emphasize the inclusion and

significance of the gentiles among *true spiritual* Israel. The first will be last and the last will be first. And then, following these (and Manasseh), the rest of the sons of Leah and Rachel are listed in their proper order.

3) Another note of interest is that “Dan,” Bilhah’s other son is not mentioned, but rather he is replaced by Manasseh. And while Manasseh is listed, Ephraim is not listed, but Joseph is. It is believed that Dan is intentionally not listed, possibly because his tribe is most associated with idolatry, as they were the tribe that went completely astray in the book of Judges, adopting their own priesthood through Micah, along with his idol shrine (Judges 18). And furthermore, when the kingdom was divided, Dan was one of the two places where Jeroboam had set up a golden calf, thereby, setting the idolatrous precedent for every other king in the northern kingdom (see 1 Kings 12:25-33). Replacing Dan with Manasseh, here in Revelation, would serve to reinforce another important message in Revelation, namely, that idolaters will not overcome and be found in the glorious kingdom of God.

4) Another indication that this vision is meant to represent *spiritual* Israel and not *ethnic* Israel, is the fact that neither the twelve patriarchs of Israel nor the twelve land inheriting tribes are fully represented here. In other words, if this were to represent the twelve patriarchs, then Dan should be here and Manasseh should not. And if this were to represent the twelve land inheriting tribes, then Levi (who had no land inheritance—God was their inheritance) and Joseph should not be here, and Ephraim and Dan should.

5) Lastly, when you consider our first Scripture reading in Revelation 14, which speaks again of these 144,000, clearly we find that they represent the whole church of our Lord, *spiritual Israel*, as the church militant on earth, ready to endure the great tribulation and to overcome (see also Rev. 9:4).

And so, these 144,000 are sealed, so that they will not be harmed by the great tribulation. They will overcome, and therefore, they will stand at the return of Christ and the final judgment. Now, we must also understand a few key facts about this group, and their sealing, if we are to grasp the full message here given to us.

1) The number 144,000 is not meant to represent a literal figure. In other words, there are not literally only 144,000 who are sealed. As with probably every other number in Revelation, this number is meant to be symbolic and spiritual in nature. When you look at this number, at least two things can be noted. First, is that it indicates that there are indeed a fixed number of people whom God has elected and sealed so that they will overcome. In other words, every one of God's elect will persevere and overcome. They must; they have to...not one of Christ's sheep can or will be lost; the complete and entire number of them must and will make it to glory. The militant church, in her fullness, though battle weary and sorely oppressed, will overcome...because God has sealed them in Christ. And then second, the number 144,000 is made up of 12x12x1000. The two twelves remind us of the twenty-four elders from chapter 4, and the dimensions of the gates and the foundations of the New Jerusalem found at the end of Revelation (chapter 21), both of which represent the church. Together, the two dimensions of 12 and the one thousand, give us the church in all of her fullness, or the universal church as represented on earth. (Patriarchal and Apostolic dimensions)

2) The "sealing" is significant as well because it answers the question posed by the wicked at the end of chapter 6. "For the great day of [Christ's] wrath has come, and who is able to stand?" Well, here we are given the answer to that question, namely, those who are sealed by God. The *true spiritual* Israel, in all of her fullness, is sealed by God, and she is able to stand in the great day of His wrath!

And what then is this sealing? Well, right from the outset, we can assume that it does something for the true children of God, which would enable them to withstand all opposition, so that they overcome, and their faith does not fail. This sealing, placed by God, not visibly on His people, but in their hearts, enables them, even through great trials and sufferings, to remain steadfast and faithful, bearing the light of Christ in and by their sufferings. It seals them not from suffering and hardship; no, we have already seen that the people of God will suffer much hardship and suffering in this life, but rather it seals them from losing their faith. It gives them everything they need to persevere and overcome, so that they will stand when this world is brought to its end by Christ. And it includes receiving the name of God and the name of the city of God (the New Jerusalem), and the new name of Christ (as their Redeemer and co-heir) upon them (Rev. 3:12). More specifically, I believe that this sealing is the sealing of the Holy Spirit,

which is deposited in the hearts of all of God's true children upon conversion. Paul mentions this mysterious seal in Ephesians 1:13-14, when he tells the brethren, "In Christ you also trusted, after you heard the world of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory." It is by this very seal, brethren, that we recognize our true relationship with the living God, something that we cannot even wholly explain to the unbeliever, but that filial, intimate reality whereby our souls cry out, "Abba, Father," as we commune with God in Christ!

And brethren, I think that the important thing for us to take from this section of chapter 7 is the reality that every last one of Christ's sheep must and will stand to the end. The same sovereign God who reigns at the center of all things, and whose will cannot be thwarted, has sealed His people, so that they must and will overcome. They will stand! And they stand, solely because of the grace of God. The seal is not asked for; it is not taken or even desired (from the outset), but rather, God, by His Spirit, seals all of His people, and not one of them will be lost. And until every last one of His elect children are saved, the angels of judgment, restrain the winds; they hold back the ultimate destruction that is to come upon this world. [Example: When Sodom and Gomorrah were to be destroyed, the angels urged Lot to get out of the city, saying, "Hurry, escape [to Zoar], For I cannot do anything until you arrive there"- Genesis 19:22]

II. The Church Triumphant (at rest with Christ in glory!)

And then, brethren, in verses 9-17, we move on to see the same church, but from a different standpoint. Here we see the church, no longer militant (and in the battle), but rather, triumphant and at rest with Christ in glory. Here is the end of the sealed, who must and will stand through the great tribulation and the Day of God's wrath. And again, we will see this glorious picture reiterated in different ways throughout the remainder of the Revelation as well. [Read verses 9-17].

While I think this text speaks quite well for itself, brethren, but let me just add a few summary thoughts to all that we have just read. Notice, brethren, that this is the direct opposite of all that we are told will happen to the wicked; to the unbelievers when Christ returns. You

see, for one group, Christ's return will be a most frightful, earth shattering, soul crushing reality, and for the other group, it will be total bliss. For those who have clung to the world's idols and have dug their heels in the soil of this world, there will be nothing but terror and utter devastation when everything they have set their hearts upon crumbles before their very eyes, and they have to face the very Christ whom they have rejected and not known in truth. But for the believer, who is already seated with Christ; for the Christian who is sealed and already in union with Christ, it will be like the Bride, who having waited so long, is finally brought into the arms of her beloved husband. [Ex: Melanie waiting for Stephen to return from Iraq—hard and difficult year, requiring much patience and perseverance, but when he gets back soon, what will that be like for both of them?].

And so, here we see the end of those who have been sealed by the Spirit in Christ! Who can stand? They can and will, and here is their end! A great multitude of people from all over the world; made up of many nations, tribes, tongues and people groups, together as one body, standing before the throne of God and before the Lamb, clothed in the righteous, pure white robes of Christ, waving palm branches and crying aloud, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And everyone else in heaven falls on their faces before the throne and offers unanimous worship in the form of, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom, thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen." No more tears, no more sorrows, no more pain or suffering or death, no more wars or trials or tribulations...those things will be no more! For the former things will have passed away, and they will be with God, and they will be His people and He will be their God! And the Lamb will Shepherd them; He will care for them with the utmost care...they will never hunger or thirst or be harmed ever again...for, He will lead them to living fountains of water!

And so ends the interlude between the sixth and seventh seal. The message in a nut shell can be summarized in the following three ways:

1) Everyone of God's elect is sealed by God so that he will overcome and stand, even through the Day of His wrath.

2) Everyone of God's elect will be committed to the eternal care of Christ, the Shepherd, in glory, where only joy and elation are found forever!

3) Everyone who is sealed will manifest the evidence of this sealing by washing their robes white in the blood of Christ.

And so, to the believer, the message is, “Hang in there! Stay the course even unto death! Don’t settle into the soil of this world, but maintain your footing in Christ! Abide in Christ, because you are almost home. And fear not, because no matter what is thrown your way, you will persevere; you must persevere because God has sealed you in Christ! Stay the course; strengthen your commitment, and finish the race!

And to the unbeliever, know that you will only stand in the end, if you too have truly washed your robes white in the blood of Christ. If you are not truly in Christ this morning; if you have not repented and turned away from your sins; and if you have not put your entire faith and confidence in Christ and in Christ alone, then you will not stand! You will be overcome with terror when you face Him without the assurance that His blood bought grace is covering you. There will be an end to your life; there will be an end to this life, don’t die outside of Christ! Don’t die in your sins! Repent, and believe into Christ; call upon Him for His mercy and forgiveness, and follow Him now, before it is too late! These are eternal matters!

AMEN!!!

Benediction: “For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake (Philippians 1:29)...Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I urge you in the sight of God who gives life to all things, and before Christ Jesus who witnessed the good confession before Pontius Pilate, that you keep this commandment without spot, blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ's appearing, which He will manifest in His own time, He who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power. Amen” (1 Timothy 6:12-16).