

God's Incredible Protection

Revelation 7:1-8

By Phillip G. Kayser at Dominion Covenant Church on 2016-04-17

God's Incredible Protection

Revelation 7:1-8

By Phillip G. Kayser at Dominion Covenant Church on 2016-04-17

Text - Revelation 7:1-8

7:1 And after this I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, so that no wind should blow upon the earth, not on the sea, not on any tree. 2 And I saw another angel ascending from the sun's rising, having the seal of the Living God. And he cried out with a loud voice to the four angels, to whom it had been granted to harm the earth and the sea, 3 saying: "Do not harm the earth nor the sea nor the trees, until we have sealed the slaves of our God on their foreheads." 4 And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty four thousand, sealed out of every tribe of the sons of Israel: 5 From the tribe of Judah twelve thousand were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand, from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand, 6 from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand, from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand, from the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand, 7 from the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand, from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand, from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand, 8 from the tribe of Zebulon twelve thousand, from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand, from the tribe of Benjamin twelve thousand were sealed.

Introduction - unbliblical interpretations of this passage

We come to a passage that has been yanked out of its historical context by many cults. And these cults can do that because they are ignoring the interpretive clues that anchor it in first century Jewish Christianity. They also ignore the interpretive principles that John laid down in chapter 1. And I won't spend a lot of time on it, but let me list some of the cults that claim they represent the 144,000 - that they are the remnant at the end of history:

The Donatists of the fourth century claimed that they (and they alone) were the 144,000 who remained true to God while the rest of the church had compromised. Others who made this claim were the Spiritual Franciscans of the thirteenth century, the Melchiorites of the sixteenth century, Roger Williams and his separatists in the seventeenth century, the Southcottians in the nineteenth century. For those of you who aren't familiar with Southcottians, they were followers of Joanna Southcott in England. She was a self-proclaimed prophetess who claimed to be the woman in Revelation 12. And it is amazing how many people followed her, and the vast amounts of money spent in promoting her so-called prophetic writings. Anyway, moving on to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries you have the Seventh Day Adventists, Russellites, Jehovah's Witnesses (at least they claim that a select group of them are the 144,000), the Layman's Home Missionary

Movement, Johnsonism, the New and Latter House of Israel sect, Household of Faith Adventists, Davidian Seventh-Day Adventists, Children of God sect, the UFO sect of Solara Antara Amaa-ra, the Branch Davidians, the Unification Church (sometimes known as Moonites or followers of Reverend Sung Myung Moon), the Christian Skoptsy sect in Russia, and some New Age cults. And you might wonder, how on earth could such disparate groups think they were the fulfillment of this prophecy? It's because of three things: 1) they have yanked the passage out of its historical context, 2) they have ignored the interpretive clues within the passage that tie it to first century Jewish Christians, 3) and they have ignored some of the rules of interpretation that were set down by John in chapter 1.

But you don't have to be a cult to make those three errors. Let me pick on the good guys too. And the guys I'm going to pick on now are orthodox Christians (some of them even Reformed - some of them even friends of mine) who claim that the group in verses 1-8 is identical to the group in verses 9-17. They believe each vision refers to the whole church, and that both visions are describing the same group from different perspectives. And they insist that verses 1-8 is not talking about Jewish Christians.

Typically these interpreters come from the Idealist or Recapitulationist camps, though I have even run across a few of my Partial Preterist buddies who hold to this view as well. Typically these interpreters also hold to Replacement Theology that says that there is no future for an ethnic Israel or ethnic Jews. I think this is a fantastic passage for overturning that viewpoint, and I will show you why in a bit.

But they say that these 144,000 are described as the twelve tribes of Israel because the kingdom was taken away from national Israel and given to the church, which has become the true Israel. For example, Richard Bauckham says, "The 144,000 from the twelve tribes of Israel (7:4-8) contrast with the innumerable multitude from all nations (7:9), but the two images depict the same reality."¹ And he goes on to try to prove that the 144,000 really weren't Jews and that the Gentiles being described in the next section are members of the twelve tribes Israel. They will point to the book of James and say, "That is addressed to the whole church and yet it is addressed to the twelve tribes." And actually, I don't agree that James was addressed to Gentiles. James was an apostle to the circumcision. Now, I *do* agree that we unnatural branches have been grafted into Israel just like Gentiles were able to be grafted into Israel in the book of Esther, but there is no Biblical justification

¹ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 76.

for saying that we are part of the twelve tribes. That's a quite different statement. And I believe that this passage is a strong proof text against replacement theology. I'll just list five of the most obvious interpretive clues that help us to identify who these people were.

First, to believe any of the interpretations that I have just looked at (whether cultic or orthodox), you have to ignore the time sequences. Verse 1 says, "After this," so chapter 7 clearly comes after chapter 6, and verse 9 says, "After these things," and that means verses 9-17 have to occur after the historical events of verses 1-8. Yet numerous commentaries either totally ignore the phrase "after these things" and do not comment on it, or they say that it really doesn't mean that there is a historical sequence; it just means that this is the next vision. Now, for the sake of the argument I will say that if you ignored all of the time sequences in chapters 4-11 that we looked at in a previous sermon, you could possibly say that the phrase in verse 1 only means "here is the next vision." But you can't do that with verse 9. Verse 9 has the plural, referring to the detailed events in verses 1-8. So verse 9 doesn't say, "After this vision" or "after this" or "next." You would expect something like that if he was simply referring to the next vision. But "after these things" (plural) clearly refers to the specific historical events that he has finished talking about. There is something that occurs after those events; not after the vision, but after those events. That is the first interpretive clue that he is talking about something uniquely first century and that verses 9-17 is a different subgroup of the church than the group in verses 1-8.

Second, verse 9 describes a body of Christians from "all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues" while our section describes only Christians from twelve tribes of Israel. And especially since nations are distinguished from tribes, the nation of the first section that is made up of twelve tribes is different from the nations (plural) described in the second section. Both sections are dealing with people being saved out of nationally identified groupings of people, and it is clear that the national entity being described in verses 1-8 is not Gentile. When Jews read about Israel and the nations they are used to thinking Israel and the Gentiles. In fact, the word "Gentile" is the word for "nation."

You see, one of the reasons for including this section is to show that though God had destroyed apostate Israel, He had not thrown off the remnant of Israel. As Chilton words it, "Jerusalem is sacked and burned, its inhabitants killed and scattered; but *Israel* - all of her people, in all of her tribes - is

sealed and saved."² Actually, there is one tribe (Dan) that had become a Judas and is not listed. But the point is that both sections of chapter 7 describe the whole church - a church which has always been composed of Jew and Gentile. And even with the order, it shows the divine principle that Paul operated by - "to the Jew first, and also to the Greek." To turn verses 1-8 into Gentile believers does violence to the text and is not reading it through Jewish eyes (the audience) or through the interpretive lens that John himself laid down in chapter 1.

Third, the second section of chapter 7 shows martyrs who are *killed* during the Great Tribulation and this one shows Christians who are *preserved* from being killed during both the Great Tribulation and the Great Wrath that is about to come. They are different groups of people. The second group is 100% composed of martyrs killed during the Great Tribulation and the first group is 100% made up of saints who were not killed during that three and a half year time. They are *not* martyrs. They are not the same group of people.

Fourth, the second section takes place in heaven while this one takes place on earth. These saints continue to have work to do upon the earth. In fact, the whole description shows the mustering of an army - a spiritual army with spiritual weapons.

Fifth, the second section involves unnumbered and uncountable myriads of Christians and this one involves an exact number from each tribe that is counted. Though both sections describe the church, they are different groups of people within the church - one that can be numbered and the other that can't be numbered.

And there are a number of other clues in both this chapter and in chapter 14 that show these 144,000 were ethnic Jews in the first century.

I. The eschatology of Israel

A. Context: this is dealing with first century Jewish Christians

So let's deal with the eschatology of Israel first. There are some who agree that this is talking about ethnic Jews, but they insist it has to refer to our future. So let me add two more points as to why this was *first century* Jews. First, historians, geneticists, and Israeli experts in several fields have all concluded that Jews can no longer be divided up into tribal divisions. It's

² David Chilton, *Days of Vengeance*, (Forth Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), p. 207.

impossible. After the first century in exile they were so intermarried and intermixed that there is no distinction of tribes today. There are no genealogies that could tell you what tribe you came from. So by itself this proves that this passage could not be fulfilled any time after the first century. It automatically rules out the fourth century Donatists or any of the other cultic groups we have mentioned.

Second, to put these 144,000 into some future time period violates the time sequences in this book, which all indicate that chapters 6-11 are in the first century. And even a lot Historical Premils agree. So the Dispensational interpretation does not make sense. They claim to interpret Revelation literally, but if you really took this literally, then it would have to have been fulfilled at a time when people know their tribal distinctions. Any descendants of Israel who are saved in the future (and they will be saved) will not be able to tell you what tribe they are from. That's the key point. So we are anchored in the first century.

B. This is dealing with the remnant being saved from national Jews in the first century (v. 4-8)

But let me try to tie this passage together with Romans 11 and show how this chapter confirms the Postmillennial interpretation of Romans 11. And I am going to build one argument upon another. The first argument is obviously the one we have already been making - that this is dealing with the remnant being saved from national Jews in the first century.

Notice the phrases "out of" and "sons of" in verse 4. Why say "out of every tribe of the sons of Israel" if it wasn't the literal descendants of Israel that Jesus was referring to? This is yet another argument that it has to be ethnic. Certainly the church is the spiritual Israel, but are people being saved out of the church? No. That doesn't make any sense. Look at verse 4. It says, "And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty four thousand, sealed *out of* every tribe of the sons of Israel:" And then comes the listing of those saved out of each tribe. If this had nothing to do with ethnic or national Israel, why would it say, "*out of* every tribe"? The Greek for "out of" indicates that the bulk of the people in each tribe were left unsaved in the first century. Judah and Gad are not saved; only those sealed out of Judah and Gad are saved. And just for the sake of the argument, assume that John wanted to say that these were ethnic Jewish believers - can you think of any stronger way for John to communicate that he is referring to ethnic Jews than the way he has worded it? I can't. I don't know how he could have been clearer. And yet so many interpreters take verses 1-8 as referring to Gentile

Christians.

Let me try to illustrate this. Imagine that I had twelve jars of flour lined up over on this wall, and each jar of flour had one of the names of the tribes of Israel on it. These are huge jars, and I am going to make a huge cake. So we have a mixing bowl on the podium that we will call the church. The mixing bowl used to be right over here among these twelve tribes, but God decided to make a new Israel out of the remnant just like in Babylon during the exile.

Now, I take 1/4 cup of flour out of the jar labeled Judah. And there is a lot of flour left in that jar. But I am going to dump the flour into a mixing bowl over here, which is the church. And I am going to take a quarter cup out of Reuben, a quarter cup out of Gad, etc. And I put each of the measuring cups of flour out of each of those twelve jars and dump them into the mixing bowl labeled the church. Those twelve jars are not the church - this is the church.

But in the second half of the chapter we see that there are more people in the church. And I have one hundred other jars that I am taking several cups of flour out of (this is going to be a big cake). And those hundred other jars are all the Gentile nations that verse 9 refers to. And I take a little bit of flour out of each of those jars representing the unbelieving nations and those cups of flour get added to this mixing bowl on the podium. Do I call what is left behind in the nations the church? No. The cups that were redeemed out of those hundred jars becomes a part of the church and the 1/4 cups that were redeemed out of the twelve jars labeled the sons of Israel become part of the church, and they become the church only *when they get added to the mixing bowl*. What is left behind? Apostate Israel composed of apostate Judah, apostate Reuben, apostate Gad, etc. Judah is not the church, and Gad is not the church. Only what came *out* of them is the church.

Well, that is exactly what the text says, Literally verse 5 says, "Out of the tribe of Judah twelve thousand sealed, out of the tribe of Reuben," etc. It is clearly not that the tribe of Judah was saved - only twelve thousand out of that entire tribe were saved. So the tribe of Judah can't logically be a reference to the church as replacement theology insists. Only those saved out of Judah joined the church. And he continues to go to such lengths to list how many came out of every tribe that neither the tribes nor the whole grouping of those jars over there could possibly represent the New Testament church. Only those in the mixing bowl have the right to be called the church or to be called the New Israel. The church is now made up of Jew and Gentile. *That* is what chapter 7 is teaching.

So we are building a case for the Postmillennial idea that until the Second

Coming of Christ there will always be a church composed of both Jew and Gentile and eventually the whole nation of Israel will be saved. The first part of our argument is that this is dealing with ethnic Israel; national Israel. Now, I am having to be so pedantically precise here because this is so frequently denied. If you miss the first point, the others won't make sense.

C. Just as Romans 11 teaches, this small number from each tribe represents the remnant of Israel

The second part of my argument is that if what we have just said is correct, then this 144,000 represents the *remnant* of Israel that would survive the holocaust of AD 66-74. As Romans 9:27 words it with respect to the Jews who were alive while Paul was preaching:

“Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only the remnant will be saved.

So Romans 9:27 is pointing at apostate Israel - those twelve jars along the wall when he says that they are as numerous as the sand of the sea, but that only a remnant of them will be saved - will be put into this bowl. And Romans 11:5 says, "Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace." So Revelation 7:1-8 represents the survival of a remnant of Jewish Christians.

D. If the 144,000 are firstfruits (14:4), then it implies that more will be saved - a major harvest to come (cf. Paul's argument in Romans 11)

The third part of my argument is that Revelation 14:4 refers to this remnant once more and calls them "a firstfruits to God and to the Lamb." Well, if the first century Jews who were saved were a kind of firstfruits harvest, then it implies that there is a much larger harvest of Jews in the future. A firstfruits is by definition only a tiny portion (the first portion) of the full harvest. If there is not a massive harvest of Jews at some point in history, then you can hardly call what happened in the first century a firstfruits. In Jewish terminology, a firstfruits only involved a small token of two or three sheaves from a field. The rest of the field was to be harvested at a later time.

And that is exactly what the apostle Paul argues in Romans 11. He argues that Israel was not replaced or cast away. And he gives two arguments to prove what he is saying. First, he says that he himself is a Jew, so obviously God didn't cast away ethnic Israel if a Jew like him could be saved. And the second argument that he gives is that there is a sizable remnant of Jews who continued to be saved. If God is continuing to save them, obviously He is

not casting them away. And he argues that there will be a remnant of Jews who will believe as history progresses until the point that the majority of Gentile nations are converted. And when remnant theology and experience among the Gentiles gives way to fullness theology, at that point in history Jewish believers will no longer be a remnant since the entire nation - its fullness will be saved. At some point in our future there will be a national conversion of Jews. In my understanding of the Jewish use of the term "firstfruits" that is an absolutely necessary logical conclusion from these first century Jews being called a kind of firstfruits in chapter 14.

And my reading of the Old Testament prophets is that Israel's future conversion will happen in one day. Romans 11 argues that as a result of that conversion, God will pour out such blessing upon the world that it will be like life from the dead. All the blessings promised in the Old Testament will take place. All the blessings promised in Revelation 20-22 will take place. This is the Postmillennial argument. And I think it is all implied in calling the 144,000 a firstfruits.

E. These Jews are part of the bride of Christ (all of chapter 7)

But at least we can all agree that the whole of chapter 7 taken together represents Jew and Gentile being equally members of the church of Jesus Christ. So that is your eschatology lesson this morning. If you want to flesh it out more, read John Murray's commentary on Romans 11, more read David Chilton's book, *Paradise Restored*.

II. Applications of this passage

A. God is sovereign during tough times

God is sovereign over creation (v. 1)

But with the eschatology lesson behind us, let's dig into the text a bit more and pull out four comforting lessons that can be applied to any time in history. The first lesson is that God is sovereign during tough times. We already saw that Jesus was sovereign in every section of chapter 6 because He was the one who opened every seal. But notice His absolute sovereignty over creation in verse 1:

And after this I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, so that no wind should blow upon the earth, not on the sea, not on any tree.

God controls wind, sea, earth, and trees. Clark's commentary points out in terms of timing that this was a perfect pause in God's judgments. The winds would bring devastation in the next chapters, but while the Jewish Christians fled Jerusalem in AD 66 in obedience to Jesus' command in Matthew 24 and Luke 21, God caused the weather conditions to be perfect. In Matthew 24:20 He had told them to pray for good weather conditions when it became time to flee from Jerusalem. I assume they obeyed Him and prayed for good weather, because this would have been a perfect answer. There was a calmness from all four points of the compass. God is sovereign over creation.

God is sovereign over the judgments that fall (vv. 2-3)

Second, God is sovereign over the judgments that fall upon a nation. Verses 2-3 say,

2 And I saw another angel ascending from the sun's rising, having the seal of the Living God. And he cried out with a loud voice to the four angels, to whom it had been granted to harm the earth and the sea, 3 saying: "Do not harm the earth nor the sea nor the trees, until we have sealed the slaves of our God on their foreheads."

Neither angels of judgment nor demons of affliction could touch God's people without God's permission. Though the armies of Florus brought devastation in April, and though the Zealots created havoc in the following months, and though Cestius Gallus would kill numerous people that fall, God was sovereign over who would bring these devastations, how they would bring them, and when they would bring them. And that is a tough thing for some to be convinced of - especially when evil men freely do what they do. How can God be sovereign and men still be free? Well, the Bible affirms both sides of that equation. So even though the judgments are mediated through evil men, those judgments are precisely predicted and controlled by God. They could not do their harm until God's protection of these saints was in place.

God's timing is perfect during tough times

And the word "till" indicates that God's *timing* is perfect during tough times. The Roman soldiers under Cestius would decimate the countryside, scorching the earth, sea, and trees, and destroying the crops. But before his armies could do that, God sealed and protected his people.

And of course, God's people were (according to the Christian historian, Eusebius) obedient to Christ's warnings, and as soon as they saw Jerusalem surrounded by armies they fled the city. There were actually three

times when the Christians might have had opportunity to flee. The first would have been after the attack of Florus in April, the second would have been when they saw the heavenly chariots surrounding Jerusalem in May, and the third would have been after Cestius attacked Jerusalem in November and then mysteriously fled from Jerusalem on November 25. Nobody knows why he fled, but it was no doubt orchestrated by God to allow the last remnants to flee. God wanted to make sure that every Christian was sealed, able to leave, and protected by a king that he raised up during the whole time they stayed in Pella. Eusebius records that and says that no Christians died in Jerusalem during that war. I would take exception with that, since there were two prophets who deliberately stayed behind and who died.

God is sovereign in salvation (exactly 144,000)

The last evidence of God's sovereignty can be seen in the exact number of people who were saved from each of these tribes and the fact that one tribe was excluded - Dan. God is sovereign in salvation, and if these numbers are literal, then it indicates that the number saved and the number damned was not left to chance at all. Only if the five points of Calvinism are true could there be exactly 12,000 saved from twelve tribes, and not one more or one less.

Now, I am not dogmatic that these numbers have to be literal. They could be entirely symbolic. But as you know, I am skeptical of that throughout the book of Revelation. I have been teaching that the symbols in Revelation are historical realities and not an either/or scenario. So the way I understand it is that God saved exactly that number of Jews from exactly those tribes, and not one more or one less could be saved than those whom God had predestined. As the Westminster Confession of Faith words it,

These angels and men, thus predestinated, and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished.

Could there be a better illustration of the doctrines of election and effectual calling than these verses? I don't think so. God is sovereign in salvation, with the elect of every generation being a precise number that were in God's mind long before their salvation happened.

When you are going through tough times you can be grateful that God is sovereign. He is not taken by surprise; He is not frustrated by man's free will. He ordains the end and the beginning and all the parts in between. Nothing happens by chance.

B. God is merciful during tough times and everything in this passage showcases His chesed (mercy, covenant faithfulness, loving kindness)

But there is another comforting doctrine in here. God's mercy during tough times is also wonderfully exemplified in these verses. Earlier in chapter 6 we saw that there were many Jewish Christians who had the privilege of martyrdom and enjoying the glories of heaven early. That showcases one manifestation of God's mercy. But this showcases God's mercies flowing in sparing His people from temporal trials. Either way, our God is so kind and so merciful. He does not give us what we deserve (which would be hell), and so anything we receive is a mercy. So the attribute of mercy is an incredibly comforting doctrine.

C. God uses angels during tough times

There is a third comforting doctrine, and that is that He uses angels on our behalf during tough times. Yes there are a lot of demons talked about in this book. But in chapter 12 we will see that there are twice as many good angels as there are bad angels. And Hebrews 1:14 calls those good angels ministering spirits who minister or serve those who are called to inherit salvation. That's an amazing doctrine - that powerful angels are sent by God to serve us.

In this case, some of the angels put a mark on the foreheads of these 144,000. In verse 3 they say, "Do not harm the earth nor the sea nor the trees, until we have sealed the slaves of our God on their foreheads." What does that refer to? Well, since Revelation thematically follows Ezekiel, we can look at Ezekiel 9. In Ezekiel 9 there are six angels who have battle axes in their hands ready to destroy the Israelites in Jerusalem. But before they do their work of destruction, God tells one of them,

"Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and cry over all the abominations that are done within it." (Ezek. 9:4)

Here are people who cannot stand the evil in their society; it grieves them; they groan over it and weep over it. Don't expect to be protected from our culture if you don't weep over the sins of our culture. So God singles them out with some kind of a mark that is visible to angels but is invisible to men. And after they have been marked, God says,

..."Go after him through the city and kill; do not let your eye spare, nor have any pity. Utterly slay old and young men, maidens and little children and women; but do not come near anyone on whom is the mark; and begin at My sanctuary."

And God does the same thing here: prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, God marked for protection a remnant of believing Jews. And angels were somehow involved in putting that mark there.

But this passage mentions other functions for angels. Verse 1 seems to indicate that certain angels have power to control wind. And the reference to the four corners of the earth is not a statement of flat earth theology as liberals claim. It is a reference to the four corners of the compass or the four corners of a map. They knew the earth was round, and just as we speak of East, West, North, and South, they spoke of those as the four corners. And by the way, the Bible says that there is no point at which East meets West, so they knew the earth was round. But they did know that you actually get to a point called north and a south that was measured, so they were also familiar with magnetic poles. So there is nothing unscientific about this statement.

But in any case, we should rejoice at the work of angels that is mentioned in verses 1-8. They are involved in some of the processes of the physical world. They are involved in judgments. It says that they travel. They speak. They have authority. They operate under authority, which can be seen in the last phrase of verse 2 "to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea." That verse also teaches that these angels are involved in judgments. Verse 3 indicates they work together and strategize together. Verses 4-8 indicates that they seal and protect God's people. So there is a bit of angelology going on these verses that is worth understanding. We won't do that this morning since I am mainly pointing out that we can take comfort in the fact that God's angels go with us through our tough times. The doctrine of angels is a comforting doctrine.

III. The meaning of all the symbols in this passage

The last comforting thing that the Jews would have instantly gotten was the symbols. The things mentioned in Revelation can be literally found in history, but those same literal events are also often symbols. And there are three symbols that showcase God's covenant faithfulness or mercy, which is expressed in the Hebrew word *chesed*. And it is unfortunate that I have to dig it out for you because it makes the symbols lose some of their punch. But for a first century Jewish Christian, these symbols would have brought great comfort.

The first symbol is "wind" and specifically "the four winds." I have numerous references that indicate that wind is a symbol of God's judgments - especially God's judgments using nations (Jer 13:24; 22:22; 51:1-2; Ezek. 1:4; 13:11-16; Jer. 49:36). For example, in Jeremiah 49:36 God says,

Against Elam I will bring the four winds from the four quarters of heaven, and scatter them toward all those winds; there shall be no nations where the outcasts of Elam will not go.

And then the next verse describes those four winds as being the universal power of Babylon. And there are several other passages that identify the winds of judgment being various nations that God used to bring judgments. So in context here, the number four is a symbol for the universal nature of something (just like we say the four ends of earth or the four ends of heaven). And the wind was a symbol of power and judgment. So the four winds are the universal power of Rome being used to bring destruction upon Israel.

We can understand God's pausing of judgment being a symbol of mercy, but why would the judgment itself be considered mercy? Why would it bring comfort to these Jews? I think Rushdoony explains it well when he says,

Judgment thus is not only the other side of the coin of salvation, but it is also an act of grace and mercy to the people of God. However devastating the fall of Jerusalem was to the faithful remnant, without that fall no remnant would have remained.³

Why is that the case? Because the intent of these enemies was to obliterate the church. We may not like judgment, but judgment on a nation is often God's way of preserving His people. I think of Psalm 136 which has that refrain happening in every verse - "for His mercy endures forever." It's the Hebrew word *chesed* which refers to mercy, loving kindness, and covenant faithfulness. The Psalm will mention bad things that happened to God's people, and without skipping a beat will give the reason for those bad things happening: "For His mercy endures forever." Then it will mention happy things and affirm "for His mercy endures forever." And it will mention various providences in creation, "for His mercy endures forever," and judgments on the earth "for His mercy endures forever." The Psalm indicates that all of creation and history showcases God's *chesed*, - His mercy, covenant faithfulness, and loving kindness. So the four winds are a mercy by taking out the church's enemies and holding them back for a time while the church can escape.

What about the seal on the foreheads? We already saw that angels did literally put something upon people to protect them. Humans couldn't see it, but angels and demons obviously could. But chapter 14 clarifies what was on the seal - it was the name of the Father stamped on their foreheads. That's a cool image - you belong to the Father. He claims you as His own, provides

³ Rousas John Rushdoony, *Salvation and Godly Rule* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1983), p. 141.

for you, and protects. So just as the beast from the bottomless pit put his name on unbelievers (claiming them as his property), God uses angels to put His name on these true believers. They are branded as His bondslaves.

And it is called a seal. Seals in the ancient east were used for three things. They showed ownership. Second, they protected against tampering. Third, it was a certification or guarantee of something. And I think it is a wonderful thing that God would be willing to put His official seal on us - especially with His name. It shows that He owns us, protects us as His property, and certifies to all angels and demons that we are the real thing, "and don't you touch My property." I am so grateful that we are signed, sealed, and delivered to God's loving care just like those first century saints.

The last symbol is the 144,000, and it too shows God's mercy and *chesed*.

We have already seen that the number of Jewish believers in the first century was exactly 12,000 from twelve tribes. As they counted up their numbers, they could not have missed the fact that God was still being faithful to His promises to Abraham. It no doubt sent shivers down their spine. As Paul worded it in Romans 11:1 -

I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew...

And then comes an extended apologetic for why there will never be a time in history when at least a remnant of Jews will be saved and secondly, why there is coming a day in history when the entire people of Israel living at that juncture will be saved - again showcasing God's predestinating power. He has the power to save a remnant in every age and He has the power to save every man, woman, and child at some future point in history.

This is something that many Amils are skeptical of. How could every man, woman, and child be saved in a day? Because God is sovereign. They are skeptical that these numbers could be literal in Revelation 7. How can God save such a precise number of people? Surely it can't be literal. But if it is literal it shows not only God's sovereignty but it also symbolizes the fact that God has not cast off His ancient people Israel. Why mention these various tribes of Israel here, and why would Paul mention that He was of the tribe of Benjamin if Romans 11 has nothing to do with ethnic Israel? It makes no sense. But if you take this as a *literal* number, then it showcases God's sovereignty in the salvation of Jews in Romans 9-11. And if you take this literal historical fact as a *symbol* it showcases His perpetual mercies to Israel in a powerful way.

But these 144,000 are not simply saved. They are saved to be a spiritual army taking the conquest of the Great Commission. And this is what sends chills up and down my spine. To human eyes it might seem like they are grasshoppers in the sight of the giants, the Canaanites, and the Philistines. What can they do against a monster like Rome? Well - with God they can do valiantly, and this chapter shows God mustering a first century army. With multiplied millions of Gentile Christians killed off by Nero in AD 62-68 (and verses 9-17 will be describing those martyrs), this army of Jewish Christians would start the process of evangelism all over again and begin turning the world upside down again. Chilton says,

The number 144,000 is obviously symbolic: twelve (the number of Israel) squared, then multiplied by 1000 (ten and its multiples symbolizing many; cf. Deut. 1:11; 7:9; Ps. 50:10; 68:17; 84:10; 90:4). St. John pictures for us the ideal Israel, Israel as it was meant to be, in all its perfection, symmetry, and completeness; the holy Army of God, mustered for battle according to her thousands (cf. 1 Chron. 4-7). The “thousand” was the basic military division in the camp of Israel (Num. 10:2-4, 35-36; 31:1-5, 48-54; 2 Sam. 18:1; 1 Chron. 12:20; 13:1; 15:25; 26:26; 27:1; 28:1; 29:6; 2 Chron. 1:2; 17:14-19; Ps. 68:17). This is the significance of Micah’s famous prophecy of the Nativity: Even though Bethlehem is too small to be counted “among the thousands of Judah,” too insignificant to be considered seriously in the nation’s military strategy, yet “from you One will go forth for Me to be Ruler in Israel,” the King who will establish God’s justice and peace to the ends of the earth (Mic. 5:1-15). It is in terms of this Biblical imagery that St. John hears the names of the tribes shouted out: He is listening to the military roll-call of the Lord’s Hosts. In this case, each of the twelve tribes is able to field twelve full divisions, a numerically perfect army of 144,000 soldiers of the Lord.⁴

Why do we need an army? Because God has called us to conquer the new land of Canaan via the Great Commission. This time, rather than destroying all nations in the land we are called to convert all nations in the earth. And when we get to chapter 14 we will see that this first century army with 144 full divisions will be equipped by God to do incredible things - to start the process of turning the world upside down. So it is describing the church militant. We continue the process of being the church militant.

And by the way, even though I disagree with Replacement Theology and even though I insist that the church is composed of both Jew and Gentile, I do agree that the New Testament church is the New Israel and that Gentiles have been grafted in. And this morning I won't have time to go into detail on the differences between the ordering of the tribes around the tabernacle in the book of Numbers, versus the ordering under the post-exilic community

⁴ David Chilton, *Days of Vengeance*, (Forth Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), pp. 206-207.

(as laid out by Ezekiel in Ezekiel chapter 48), and the ordering that we find here, but it is a fascinating study in the progress of redemption. The ordering shows that the temple and city of Ezekiel 48 were not a description of the New Covenant. They are a literal city and a literal temple that was set up by Ezra and consigned to destruction by Jesus. And there are wonderful lessons in the change of names that we see from Exodus to Ezekiel that I won't deal with.

But let me highlight four of the many lessons that those four charts of these numbering give. First, There is a conspicuous absence of the priests who were central to the diagrams both before the exile and after the exile. If you look at the first chart under Numbers, Levi isn't listed on the East, West, South, or North divisions of armies. Instead, Levi and his children are at the center of the diagram. They camp all around the tabernacle.

But in the diagram of Revelation Levi is bumped out of the center and he takes place #8. Levi is still mentioned in verse 7, so that indicates that Levites were saved in the first century, but they no longer had a more central role than any other tribes. In fact, Revelation 21:22 will say that once the earthly temple is destroyed, there will be no need for a temple. It says, "But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple." So what is the point? The point is that Jesus is the only priest and He is the only temple. I don't have time to apply this principle to the ungodly mass where Rome pretends to have priests resacrificing Jesus, or Eastern Orthodoxy, or James Jordan's strange ecclesiology. Suffice it to say that this perfectly supports the Westminster Confession and the Puritan views that Jesus is the only ordained ecclesiastical Priest.

The ordering of Judah also gives Christ priority. Notice that Judah comes first in verse 5. He wasn't born first; and the listing given in Genesis 35 has him fourth because he was the fourth-born. But the very way things were changed in the Old Testament makes it clear that this placing of Judah first is very deliberate. Judah was fourth in Genesis, was placed first during the time of the kingdom because of God's purpose to make David a type of Jesus. But after the exile there was no longer a king to symbolize Jesus, so Judah was relegated to second place. But now that Jesus has ascended to His throne (chapters 4-5), His tribe (the tribe of Judah) is given the preeminent place again. It points to the fact that Jesus would be preeminent as king and He would be preeminent as priest. And so it is appropriate for us to say in the New Covenant that we have no king but Jesus; we have no priest but Jesus, and (once AD 70 came) we have no prophet but Jesus. He has the preeminence in all of life.

The third thing that is striking about the order in Revelation is that God didn't save anyone from the tribe of Dan. There is speculation on why that would be, but I believe both Hosea and Amos predict that Dan would be displaced much like Judas was displaced among the apostles. Dan was the Judas. So commentators believe that Judas' name is not written on the twelve foundations of the New Jerusalem. Though it doesn't say so specifically, I believe Matthias' name will be listed there. Likewise, Dan will be removed from that honored place, and Manassah replaces him. The only other change is that Joseph (the father of Ephraim) is listed rather than Ephraim because of the shame that Ephraim brought through their apostasy. But there was still a remnant of Ephraimites and they are placed under the name Joseph. So all of the changes in names makes perfect sense. They are read in a way to show that the birth order and tribal divisions will no longer hold a preeminent role in the New Testament.

The fourth thing that these charts clearly point to is that the church is composed of literal Jews and literal Gentiles, both of whom compose the New Israel and both of whom will inhabit the New Jerusalem. It's not just Gentile, but Jew and Gentile. And though the Jewish portion of the church is mentioned first, it is because the New Israel had to be constituted before there could be Gentiles grafted into Israel, as per the second half of the chapter. And Revelation chapters 21-22 do not say that Gentiles are outside the gates of the city. On the contrary, the Gentile nations are inside according to chapters 21-22. What is outside the city is stated in 22:15:

But outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie.

Conclusion

There is a lot more that could be said, but I think that is enough to give you a good idea of the meaning of this section. It shows us an eschatology of Israel - that God still has a place for her within His church. It shows secondly that neither Jew nor Gentile are second class citizens in His kingdom, but all equally inhabit the new Israel. But it also highlights the incredible sovereignty of God over all things, including salvation. And it showcases the incredible covenant faithfulness of God to His promises. May we take great joy in being conscripts in God's spiritual army, and take great joy in following our Commander, knowing that if He is for us, who can be against us. Amen.