

Study 8: Revelation Chapter 7

Introduction

“...What becomes of the Christians while this destructive work is going on? Do they escape or are they subject to this destruction? For this reason we find this parenthesis or interlude to show that God has provided for their protection...”

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Homework and preparation for next week:

Re-read chapter 7

Read the notes as a review of the study

Read chapter 8 in preparation for the next study

In the first century, persecution came as a result of Emperor worship, heretics, and people whose commercial interests were threatened by christianity. What things might cause christians to suffer today?

We live in a society where persecution and suffering because we are christians does not happen like it did in the first century. Yet, the message of the Revelation is clearly one of hope in a hopeless world. How does the message compare to the “struggles” that we face in life? (Acts 14:22)

Notes for study 8: Revelation Chapter 7

“...What becomes of the Christians while this destructive work is going on? Do they escape or are they subject to this destruction? For this reason we find this parenthesis or interlude to show that God has provided for their protection¹...”

Introduction

Chapter seven represents an interlude in the opening of the seals. The sixth seal has been opened, but the seventh seal has yet to be opened. John has described the conditions of the saints as the seals were opened, and the great tribulation when the sixth seal was opened. The natural question is “what happens to the saints during the period of tribulation?” The question is answered in chapter seven.

The Four Winds

John sees a vision of angels holding back the wind “...After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree...” (7:1 NIV). Remember that these are images, and not to be taken literally – the earth is a sphere, and doesn’t have any corners! But, we understand the idea that the wind can come from the North, the South, the East, or the West. The angels (which were subject to God) were in control of the events of nature. Some winds are good (without it, the sailors of old ended up in the doldrums, and couldn’t go anywhere for (sometimes) months), and some winds can be bad – we only have to think of the destructive forces of cyclones (also called hurricanes or typhoons, dependent upon what part of the world you happen to live in). God is in control over the events of nature, and He is most certainly in control over the uprising of Rome against the Christians.

As the vision progresses, another angel appears “...Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God...” (7:2 NIV). The direction of “east” is significant – it is the direction of God. Hailey notes²:

When Jehovah left Jerusalem, before 586 B.C. giving the city up to destruction, He departed to the east of the city (Ezek. 11:23); and when His glory returned, it “came from the way of the east” (Ezek. 43:2). God’s glory is now appearing from that same direction as he sends His angel to preserve and give assurance to His saints.

So, this angel is coming from God, and with message – *the seal of the living God*. The message concerns the things that are happening on the earth “...He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea...” (7:2 NIV). Whilst at first we might think the message relates to the control over the forces of nature, it is clear from the next verse that it is *control over the forces of tribulation* that were coming on the Christians. The

Alternate Views of the Text

Wallace (p.157) notes: “(The) recess between the sixth and seventh seal signifies a lapse between the announcements of judgment and the execution of them, and corresponds to the period of escape promised the disciples by Jesus, in Matt. 24:15-25 and Luke 21:18-19, in his description of the siege of Jerusalem; and it was fulfilled in the withdrawal of the Roman armies, under the command of the Roman general, Titus, after the siege had commenced. It is described by Josephus, an eyewitness to the embattled scenes of the destruction of Jerusalem, with additional evidence from the Roman historian Pliny...”

Further, (p. 158) “The designation *on the earth* referred particularly to Palestine where the Jews resided and where the gospel originated. The designation *on the sea* extends the restraining order to other parts of the world separated by the sea from the land of the Jews. The statement *nor any tree* emphasises that the word of God was being restrained everywhere men were found.”

¹ Rogers, p. 16

² Hailey, p. 202

message is "... *Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.*"... " (7:4 NIV).

A king used a seal as a guarantee of security. He usually wore a signet ring, and hence when his seal was impressed into the soft sealing wax, it was evident that he had approved of whatever it was that was sealed. As Christians, we are given the Holy Spirit as our guarantee (Eph 1:13; 4:30).

The sealing language would have the effect of assuring God's people of his special concern and plan for them. Even when facing persecution and martyrdom at the hand of the beast, they can be certain that no plague from God will touch them but that they will be in his presence forever because they are his very own possession (cf. 3:10). Therefore, the seal on the forehead is a divine mark of ownership, the presence of the Holy Spirit (cf. 2Co 1:22; Eph 1:13; 4:30). Consequently, those thus sealed must be Christians and not unconverted Jews or Gentiles. (NIVBC).

The clear message is that the destructive forces (ie the tribulation) cannot be allowed to take the Christians away from their relationship with God. If we are sealed with the Holy Spirit (which happens when we are baptised into Christ – Acts 2:38-39), then our relationship with God is secure – whatever the world might hurl at us.

Alternate Views of the Text

Wallace (p.159) notes: "The *sealing in their foreheads* was a symbol of an insignia or a mark to save them from slaughter, but not from tribulation, for chapter 2:10 said "thou shalt suffer tribulation ten days." But they would survive it; they would be preserved in the midst of it, by a mark to distinguish the true Israel, the holy seed, from old Israel, the fleshly Jew. The old Israel was soon to perish, the new Israel to be preserved; the old Jerusalem was soon destroyed by impending judgments, the new Israel to be sealed for preservation, to survive and flourish as Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, the church of the firstborn, sealed on earth and enrolled in heaven. ..." A similar imagery is employed by Jeremiah in foretelling the captivity of Israel in Babylon. (Ezek. 9:4) Its history repeats itself in these visions of tribulation in the final destruction of Jerusalem, and of Israel's nation."

The 144,000

The question arises – just who were those who were sealed? They are mentioned again in 14:1-5. If we take a literal view of the passages, then we find that they were:

- all Jews (7:4)
- all men (14:4)
- all virgins (14:4)

Whilst a literal view of this fits very nicely with an "early date-destruction of Jerusalem" view of Revelation, it is difficult to apply literally to a church that has a large proportion of Gentiles (as the churches did in the latter part of the first century), and in a Gentile world. As with other parts of Revelation, we should look at the symbolism rather than the literalness.

The number 12 identifies *organised religion*, and 144 is 12 times 12, so it is organised religion multiplied by itself, and times one thousand – full and complete religion, or the total number of saints on earth at a given point in time. "... *Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel...*" (7:4 NIV). The NIV Bible Commentary notes:

The number 144,000 is obviously obtained by combining 12,000 for each of the twelve tribes of Israel ... The "thousand" multiple appears again later, in relation to the size of the Holy City ... Thus, 12,000 is symbolic of completeness and perfection. ... John intends the number twelve to be taken symbolically. By 144,000, he signifies the sealing of the total number of God's servants who will face the Great Tribulation.

Those who are sealed come from "all the tribes of Israel," and this emphasizes even more the universality and comprehensiveness of the Christian gospel. Whereas in first-century Judaism there were many sects with exclusive tribal claims to being the "true Israel," for the followers of Jesus all such sectarianism is broken down and all groups, regardless of

race, culture, religious background, or geographical location, are accepted before God (7:9; 14:4). There is an exclusivism in Revelation, but it is based on loyalty to Christ. (NIVBC)

The completeness is outlined by the illustration from the twelve tribes – twelve thousand from each tribe = the full complement from each one. This does not mean that it was just the Jews that he had in mind. We need to remember that the message was given to *the christians* to encourage them in their struggle against persecution. Some writers who take an early date for Revelation use this passage to show that the message was given for the Jews, and therefore the letter must have been written at a time when the christians were predominantly Jews (ie before the destruction of Jerusalem). However, this misses the point, that the 144,000 were *ALL Jews*. The first Gentiles in the church came with the household of Cornelius in AD 37 (only 4 years after Christ's death). If the christians were only Jews, and no others were in the number, then the book of Revelation must have been the first book of the New testament to have been written. [The position of the "first" book to be written is usually given to 1st Thessalonians, which was written in AD 52, although some writers suggest that James may have been written prior to that date].

John proceeds to spell out the details of the tribes for us "...*From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben ... Gad... Asher... Naphtali... Manasseh... Simeon... Levi... Issachar... Zebulun... Joseph... Benjamin 12,000...*" (7:5-8 NIV). It is noted that the twelve tribes are different than the "traditional" lists. Harkrider notes³:

Since the picture is symbolical, it is not essential that we explain why some tribes are included and others omitted, but plausible explanations may be offered as to why Dan and Ephraim were omitted. Since Joseph was made up of two tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh, one is led to ask why Joseph and Manasseh are listed and not Ephraim. A logical explanation is that Ephraim led Israel into idolatry through Jeroboam (1 Kings 11:26; 12:25-33), and Dan left his inheritance and moved north to Laish where he settled and practiced idolatry (Judges 18). Therefore neither of these stood as loyal representatives of God's covenant people.

The NIV Bible Commentary adds:

If idolatry is the reason for omitting Dan and Ephraim, the readjustment of the list to include Joseph and Manasseh to complete the twelve can be understood. Since Dan will be reckoned first in the tribal listing of the restored eschatological Jewish community (Eze 48) and John's list puts Judah first, it may be that John's listing describes the church, not ethnic Israel.

It is important to note that John does not equate the 144,000 with everyone in the tribes. Rather, his repeated use of the preposition "from" (lit., "out of"; GK G1666) in vv. 4-8 implies that the sealed were an elect group chosen out of the tribes. If John had the actual Jewish Israel in view, this use of "from" would indicate an election from the whole nation. On the other hand, if he intended to imply something about the church, his language might indicate God's selecting the true church out "from" the professing church. This thought has already been mentioned (cf. 2:14ff., 20ff.; 3:16ff.) and is supported by Eze 9:4-7, where the seal distinguished the true servants of God from the false ones among the professing people of God. Paul states the same thought: "Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: 'The Lord knows those who are his,' and 'Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness'" (2Ti 2:19).

The description of the judgments under the sixth seal (6:12ff.) ends with the question, "The great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" (6:17). John answers this

³ Harkrider, p. 92

question by implying that only the true servants of God, who are divinely sealed, can be protected from the wrath of God and the Lamb. (NIVBC).

The Great Multitude

The previous section concerns the saints on earth who were suffering. They could be assured that God is in control (hence the angels with the four winds of heaven). The natural question is “what about those who die in the persecution?” (which includes those who have already died). This returns to the vision at the opening of the fifth seal – those under the altar.

John describes them as a huge number of saints “...*After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands...*” (7:9 NIV). God promised to Abraham that his descendants would be greater than the stars in the sky, or the sands on the seashore – and that through him, all the nations of the earth would be blessed. It was through Christ that the latter promise was fulfilled. Paul reminds us that *those who are of faith are the true children of Abraham* (Gal 3:29), and they are seen in this vision as an *innumerable number*. The idea is that whilst we don’t know the number and it is impossible for us to add them all up, God knows.

These people were *before the throne, and holding palm branches*. The waving of palms was symbolic of great joy, which was reminiscent of the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev 23:33-43; Dt 16:13-17), and also of Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem (Lk 19:28-40). They *were wearing white*, which symbolises their purity. [Although it hasn’t been revealed who they were yet, we find later that they were the ones who were victorious in the face of persecution (7:14)].

The time of great joy is reflected in the things that they said “...*And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."...*” (7:10 NIV). Although they had suffered persecution, the time of suffering had long been forgotten. The suffering was over, and it was time for great joy. The hymn was directed to both the Father, and to the Lamb. The number worshipping Him has increased beyond the *innumerable number of angels*, to a *great multitude that no man can number*.

The worship in the throne room is again emphasised, with the whole congregation of heaven worshipping God “...*All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God...*” (7:11 NIV). Their worship and their support of both the Father and the Lamb is emphasised “...*saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"...*” (7:12 NIV). It should be noted that in the previous section, it was both the Father and the Lamb who were worshipped, and here the whole heavenly assembly give their support to that worship with a resounding *Amen*. Since only God is to be worshipped, that ought to be sufficient to demonstrate that Jesus is God. The matter is ended beyond doubt in the conclusion of the verse, where the worship of the Lamb is said to be worship to God.

Who are These People?

As John sees the vision, he (and the readers) are left to ponder who these people are, and one of the elders asks a rhetorical question “...*Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes--who are they, and where did they come from?"...*” (7:13 NIV). The question is designed to probe John’s thoughts rather than seek information, as his answer shows “...*I answered, "Sir, you know."...*” (7:14 NIV). The answer to the question is given, and reflects the previous vision of the fifth seal – those who had been sacrificed “...*And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb..."*” (7:14 NIV). The NKJV has a better translation “*the ones who come out of the great*

tribulation”, which emphasises the present and continuing tense, rather than the past tense. It was not a past event, but an active and continuing event. This raises the question “What is the great tribulation?” But first, we observe that their robes are white – they are pure, and they are that way because they have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. These are christians, who have been justified (made right) by Jesus’ blood. There are several possibilities for the great tribulation:

- It was the tribulation that occurred around the destruction of Jerusalem. This is consistent with an early date for the letter, but we have already observed that an early date does not make sense for a letter addressed to the seven churches in Asia Minor, to prepare them for the tribulation that was to come on the Jews in Jerusalem! It is also not consistent with the early writers who explicitly said when the letter was written (see study 1).
- It was the tribulation that occurred with the Roman persecution of christians, beginning with Nero in AD 64, and ending when Constantine issued an edict of peace in AD 313. This is consistent with the remainder of the letter, and describes events with which the christians in Asia Minor would be contemporaries. [The persecution arising with the martyrdom of Stephen should not be forgotten, and is included.]
- It is a tribulation which is to take place at the end of the present age, which will only end when Christ returns. Like the first possibility, this would have little relevance to the christians in Asia Minor.

The passage gives a measure of comfort. The first part of the chapter is a measure of comfort to those who are suffering on the earth, and the second part is a message that those who have already suffered persecution – and died as martyrs to the faith – and are comforted in the heavenly reward. The message of the letter is to reveal these things to the christians in Asia Minor who continued to suffer over a period of nearly 250 years. Consequently, the second view of the great tribulation is preferred, and is consistent with the overall message of the letter.

The Message of Comfort

As if it’s not enough just to be free from the trials and struggles, we see those who have overcome in heaven worshipping God continuously “...*Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them...*” (7:15 NIV). The image is reminiscent of worship in the tabernacle – the meeting tent that preceded the temple – it was a place of worship where only the privileged (the priests) could go. God will protect them with His covering. The worship is continual – 24/7 – like the others who worshipped before the throne (4:8). The NKJV has a slightly different rendering “*He who sits on the throne will dwell among them*”. The idea is that they are one with God, and are fully protected by Him. He is not remote from them, but lives with and among them.

This and the following verses describe the activity and condition of the true servants of God in their future and eternal relation to the Lamb. This scene is one of the most beautiful in the Bible. In it those who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb are described as being before the throne of God without fear or tremor, fully accepted by the divine Majesty. What are they doing? Theirs is no state of passivity but of continual service of God in praise and worship.

To “spread his tent [GK G5012] over them” calls to mind the Shekinah presence in the OT tabernacle or temple (Ex 40:34-38; 1Ki 8:10-11; cf. Eze 10:4, 18-19) and later in Jesus (Jn 1:14) and also the idea of a permanent heavenly dwelling (Rev 21:3). Never again will these people endure torment. They have the supreme protection of the living God himself. (NIVBC).

God's protection for His people is absolute and permanent "...*Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*"... " (7:16-17 NIV). Whilst Christians suffer under persecution and tribulation on the earth, we can rest assured that God is a just and righteous God, and will take care of His people.

Some of the Christians in Asia Minor were probably suffering from hunger and insufficient food, possibly because they would not join the trade guilds and embrace the immoral activities that were required. As a result, they might not have been able to work, and consequently had suffered from hunger and starvation. Later, many of them faced starvation by refusing to eat the food that the Romans had contaminated with oil offered in idol worship. God reminds us that we will *never again hunger or thirst!* Neither will we have to suffer the physical discomforts "*scorching heat*" and having to work in hot (or freezing cold) weather. Jesus said to the woman at the well (Jn 4:10-14) that He would give rivers of living water. The promise is delivered here for those who belong to God, and receive their reward.

At the end of the chapter, the Lamb has become the Shepherd (1 Pet 5:4). He has already described Himself as the good shepherd (Jn 10) who lays down His life for the sheep. In this picture, He cares for them even after the sheep are killed by their enemies.