

**Visions From Heaven**  
**A Study Of *Revelation* -**  
***“Sealed For Safety”***

***Bible Reading:***  
***Revelation 7: 1-17***

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If you want one word to describe a concern that many people have today, something that takes up much of their time and energy, something that causes them significant worry, that word would be - "Security."

- Security of our jobs.
- Security of resources for retirement.
- Security of available health care.
- Security of our children as they go to school.
- Security of our nation after 9/11.

And so the army gets bolstered; abuse prevention measures are put in place; careful planning and extra dollars are sunk into the medical system; Freedom 55 type planning consumes otherwise disposable income; time is carved out for extra training, hopefully giving added employment mobility.

Question, though.

As you page through magazines, listen to conversations, attend seminars and watch TV programs that cover one or more of these issues

how many of them reach beyond the first 70-90 years of our existence?

All the planning, training, saving, and educating efforts we can muster are great for those first early years of our existence in God's universe. They can make those years tolerable, and maybe even rather enjoyable.

But eventually they become ineffective.

They fall away.

Death sees to that.

Eventually the grim reaper arrives and stripped of all that once was so tangible, every human being finally arrives totally exposed before the King of Creation.

And then what??

Jesus said, "*What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his own soul?*"

Security. True enough. It **IS** necessary. But what kind of security do we strive after, anyway? Is not the greatest security that which sees to provide us with some kind of guarantee for the eternity that awaits us **AFTER** the first few 80 years on earth (if indeed we get that many)?

What will your degree do for you in that regard?

What about your RRSP's?

What about the state of the Canadian military?  
or the restructured Ottawa Hospital?

Jesus said,

*I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no*

*one can snatch them out of my hand.*

*My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all;*

*no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. (jn 10.28-9)*

It is this kind of security - eternal, heavenly security as a gracious divine gift from the holy hand of God - that is the focus of Revelation 7.

Last week we spoke of Revelation 6 and the first 6 seals being broken on the scroll of God's judgement of the world. And if you were here you will remember how we said that the first 4 seals, and the four horsemen of the apocalypse, represent the horrors and evils that sin and sin humanity inflict on the earth. Seal 5 speaks of the saints in heaven calling for God's vindication, for justice to be brought to earth. Seal 6 shows in picture form that, indeed, this is exactly what will happen.

Now we are left to wait for the seventh seal, which when removed, will allow the scroll to be unrolled and the judgements of God to be read off and enacted across the face of His world.

Chapter 7 is an interlude between the 6th and 7th seal. As John paints, in verbal form, the disasters that are coming on the earth he steps to the side and gives a background sketch, an aside, of what is happening to the church in the middle of this impending judgement. He paints a portrait of the fate of believers when God slams the earth with his judgement.

Where will they be?

Will they be afforded any security?

Structurally, it is like the arrangement of a symphony. There are the main movements which carry forward the musical theme of the symphony, but placed inbetween at crucial locations, are segments that fill in the details and the background, rounding out the production into a one, rich entirety.

This is how the book of *Revelation* is structured as well. There are three main sets of symbols: 7 seals, 7 trumpets, and seven bowls. But woven around those and inbetween those are many other details that help us to understand how God deals with his creation, both apostate and believing, and how it is that he will bring judgement on the rebellious but salvation on believers.

### REVELATION 7:1-17

So it is that we are confronted with four angels at the four corners of the earth. They are holding back the four winds. This is representative of the judgements that are about to be unleashed, judgements that are foretold in the events of seal #6.

Any of you recall the damage from the Aylmer tornado?

Have you been in a Florida storm? Or one in the mid-West?

Strong winds rightly make us feel small and powerless. There is nothing we can do against them except pick up the pieces they have scattered.

The angels are messengers sent to carry out his judgements. They work the plan of Jahweh God. At the beginning of the chapter they hold on to these judgements. They rein them in. For the present they can do no damage to land or sea or trees; they cannot destroy, in other words, life on earth.

The cry has gone up from all the great agents of security in the world - the economic leaders and military powers. They face the devastation from the seals and cry,

*"Who can stand?"*

The angels stand - firm.

There has been much destruction, much horror, and much that would threaten security in chapter 6. But these messengers of God do not run, do not fall away, do not give up.

They stand.

At the corners of the earth - v.1.

Around the throne of God - v.11.

Then comes a fifth angel sent from God, calling urgently to the others to hold back their destructive force "*until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.*"

And the scene shifts.

We see people - 144,000 of them.

They stand, too.

Please don't go down mistaken sideroads that people have carved from this chapter.

They are not the spiritually elite, as the Jehovah Witnesses would say.

And they are not the literal nation of Israel as our brother and sister premillennial dispensationalists say.

Do you know what you are looking at here?

It is Hebrew poetry.

Eugene Peterson points out (*A Distant Thunder* p.84) that poetry which we are used to reading depends on the repetition of sounds. Poets make words rhyme; they sound almost the same. The slight difference provides the emphasis and helps drive home the meaning.

The Hebrews didn't repeat sounds. They repeated ideas and images.

For example - consider Psalm 34:3

*"O magnify the Lord with me / and let us exalt his name together."*

Can you see the parallels? There are three of them -

magnify - exalt  
the Lord - His name  
with me - together

The Hebrew apostle, John, is given that kind of parallel; parallel visions:

John *hears* the number of the sealed as 144,000.

He *looks* and sees a great multitude that no one could count.

He *hears* them listed as from the tribes of Israel.

He *looks* and sees people from every nation, tribe, people, and language.

They are from God's people - the tribes of Israel.

They are from God's people - those standing before the Lamb.

If you insist on a rigid distinction between Israel and the rest of the Church you will trip against this passage along with our premillennial dispensationalist brothers and sisters. Make sure that doesn't happen.

Read this passage in the light of New Testament teaching:

Galatians 3:29 says, *"If you belong to Christ then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."*

Ephesians 3:6 teaches, *"This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus."*

Philippians 3 says, *"It is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus..."*

1 Peter 2 teaches that those who trust in the chosen and precious cornerstone are being built up in Zion as *"a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God."* That's Israel language.

What belonged to Israel in the way of identity as God's unique people, in the way of prophecy, in the way of promise, in the way of deliverance -

all that comes now through Jesus to all who believe in Him;  
to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile. (Romans 2)

That John meant this list of 12 tribes to be taken symbolically can be understood best by the very fact that his listing is no where the same as any other list from the bible. He is, in other words, dropping us a great big hint not to be too terribly literal (a good view whenever you read apocalyptic literature, at any time!).

The sound image is of 12X12X1000 -- the ancient poetic way, the *apocalyptic* way of indicating "vast, thorough-going completeness."

(Peterson, *A Distant Thunder* p.83)

It is the poetic image of the "great multitude."

**ALL** believers in the Lamb, in Jesus, are sealed.

That's Old Testament language at work.

Notice how often we're seeing that in *Revelation*?

Ezekiel 9: Judgement is coming because of sin and evil. But a loud voice cries out, *"Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it."* (v.4)

The cherubim are sent to execute judgement.... *"but do not touch anyone who has the mark."* (v.6).

I am reminded of Passover. Those whose homes were **sealed** with the blood of the Lamb were spared the plague of death.

On this the second Sunday of Pentecost I think of Ephesians 1:14, teaching us that all believers are "**sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it**" (Eph 1.14)."

When God sends his judgement he will not be out to destroy his own. They will be spiritually marked and protected,  
securely  
from his judgement.

Paul combines the two symbols of this chapter,  
standing and sealing,  
in his second letter to the Corinthians: (1:21-22)

*"Now it is God who makes both us and you **stand firm** in Christ. He anointed us, **set his seal** of ownership on us, and put His Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come."*

Sealed, protected people who belong to God.

In the face of a world that buckles under the effects of evil, they cry out with exuberant praise to God. They are doing what Paul and Silas did in the Philippian jail - singing in the face of darkness.

Evil, no matter how strong and destructive it may seem, melts away in the face and presence of God and the Lamb.

Evil is a fact.

And *Revelation* doesn't excuse or minimize it.

But it **does** put it in context.

Evil does **not** have the final word!

*Revelation 7* is the poetic image, the symphonic interlude, before the seventh seal, the assurance of the security of believers -

the complete and total gathering of all

who believingly prayed, "*no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent*" (Ps 91:10);

who trustingly sang "*The Lord will keep you from all evil; He will keep your life*" (Ps 121:7).

(Peterson 83)

My fellow believers, the times are coming, and in some sense has already come when God's judgement will come on our society for abandoning faith in him. I believe that strongly. Canada was a land where faith in God was central at one time. That faith has been abandoned. And God will bring down his judgement.

And with those judgements, as we can see from various chapters in history, and even from God's judgements on Egypt in the Old Testament, **will** come the persecution of believers. It seems that when God pushes, unbelievers tend to push back equally hard and stubbornly. And they tend to do it by taking out their fury on believers.

That was very, very true for those to whom John wrote, those suffering the effects of the persecution of the Roman Empire.

As that comes, it is important to note that God never, ever promises that his children will not suffer in this life, nor that they will be spared from tribulation and persecution.

What He secures them from is the power of these events to damage or break their relationship to God.

He promises them this:

*neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*  
(Rom 8.38,39)

Believers **will** face great tribulation.

History gives witness to that - telling of those who were crucified upside down as Peter was, or covered with pitch and used as torches for garden parties in suburban Rome, or those slowly lowered into boiling oil or burned alive or slowly stretched to death in the Middle Ages, or tortured in ways too horrible to mention in modern communist or Islamist states.

The great tribulation is, in fact, the good fight of faith, the running of the race, the test of endurance that **EVERY** believer must face from the time of commitment to Christ until death when they are lifted beyond that and brought safely to glory.

Once there, they will rest in ease and purity, with every tear wiped from their eye. Cleansed by the forgiving blood of Jesus they will have an eternal home in the presence of their Lord, their Saviour, the Lamb.

Perhaps we look at that and say, "well, then chapter 7 doesn't really apply that much in Canada, at least not yet anyway." That, as retired missionary Harry Boer points out, would be a great mistake. Believers in such areas as ours need just as much to be sealed with God's protection from spiritual harm.

Boer writes

"It has been the experience of the Church throughout the ages that when it does not suffer from external danger, danger to its spiritual health arises from within.... When the Church does not suffer from persecution, it may suffer from the even greater dangers of outward security, riches, pride, or spiritual indifference. It may, like the church of Laodicea, think that it is rich and needs nothing, whereas in fact it may be wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked (3.17). Against such threats to its life the Church needs sealing no less than against dangers that come to it from the outside...."

The beast of empire against which the early Church struggled can also appear in the sheep's clothing of false messiahs or wealth and luxury.

You know, perhaps we sometimes become disheartened as believers when we see such enormous opposition. Perhaps we become disheartened when we see a widening gap between the Christian life in the Church and Canadian society; the widening gap that leaves us misunderstood and that gives greater urgency to taking a missionary posture in our own country.

Perhaps sometimes we feel like throwing in the towel.

If that happens, it's time to read *Revelation 7*.

It's time to find new courage with a heavenly vision.

It's time to take heart from the Word of God.

For as this vision so wonderfully and poetically shows:

*"Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world!"*

(1 John 4:4)