## Revelation 7

Pastor Emeritus Joe Fuiten, Wednesday, January 22, 2020

## Sealing the 144,000 Jews

*1 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. 2 Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: 3 "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." 4 Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel. 5 From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben 12,000, from the tribe of Gad 12,000, 6 from the tribe of Asher 12,000, from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000, from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000, 7 from the tribe of Simeon 12,000, from the tribe of Levi 12,000, from the tribe of Issachar 12,000, 8 from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000, from the tribe of Joseph 12,000, from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000*.

The function of the four angels is not entirely clear. That is, it is not evident why they are holding back the wind. Possibly they are holding back the winds of judgement until after the 144,000 have been sealed. Others think it speaks of the anti-Christ activity as in Ephesians. “*Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming*.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Pulpit Commentary does not view the 144,000 as necessarily a precise number. Rather, it suggests a complete number. “*The number 12 is always typical, in the apocalypse and elsewhere, of a complete and perfect number. It is formed of 4 and multiplied by 3. Four is generally representative of the created universe, and 3 of the Godhead. 4 plus 3, that is 7; and 4 multiplied by 3, that is 12, indicate a perfect number—a number which includes and embraces everything.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

In the same way, the number 1,000 is used to denote a large and complete, even if somewhat uncertain number. Putting these two ideas together, we would say that a very large and perfect number of people had been sealed. Since the number is perfect, we would understand that not even one person had been left out, otherwise the number would not have been perfect.

There is a curiosity in the list of tribes. Although there are 12 tribes, and 12,000 come from each tribe to make up the 144,000, the original tribes of Dan and Ephraim are omitted in the list. The number is returned to 12 by inserting Levi, Joseph, and Manasseh. There has been considerable speculation as to why these names have been changed by John. Some think Dan was left out because of its inclination to idolatry. Another group thinks the tribe of Dan has become extinct. Still others think it is a copying error. I have no idea why this would be so. I am inclined just to accept the idea that a complete number of Jews are sealed. I also wonder if DNA testing will have any role in these identifications. One thing is for sure, the Jehovah’s Witness group cannot be correct that these are JW’s who will go to heaven with all subsequent people left in an earthly paradise. I also hold to the idea that these are Jews as the text plainly says rather than some representation of Christians.

But the general idea seems to be that judgement is coming upon the land and a large and complete number of Jews are to be exempted from that judgement with the evidence of their exemption being a seal. Remembering that much of Revelation is a recycling of Ezekiel and Daniel, this conclusion follows from the pattern of the vision spoken in Ezekiel 8 and 9. Condensing that vision we can look at Ezekiel 9:1-6. “*Then I heard him call out in a loud voice, "Bring the guards of the city here, each with a weapon in his hand." 2 And I saw six men coming from the direction of the upper gate, which faces north, each with a deadly weapon in his hand. With them was a man clothed in linen who had a writing kit at his side. They came in and stood beside the bronze altar. 3 Now the glory of the God of Israel went up from above the cherubim, where it had been, and moved to the threshold of the temple. Then the Lord called to the man clothed in linen who had the writing kit at his side 4 and said to him, "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." 5 As I listened, he said to the others, "Follow him through the city and kill, without showing pity or compassion. 6 Slaughter old men, young men and maidens, women and children, but do not touch anyone who has the mark. Begin at my sanctuary." So they began with the elders who were in front of the temple.”*

Ezekiel’s vision was of God’s judgement being executed in the land against those who practiced “detestable” things which included idolatry and pagan practices. Interestingly, certain sexual practices were included as in Leviticus 18:22 "*'Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable*.” What I conclude from this is the judgements of Revelation are aimed at those who do detestable things and conversely. those who do not do detestable things are spared indicated by the mark or seal of God upon them. We have assumed this to be the general view of all aspects of the book of Revelation.

The 144,000 Jews sealed by God is a topic I would like to examine more closely as to how it happened and the nature of those sealed. Verse 3 has this: *"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."* In understanding the Scripture it helps not to get too complicated and just take the Bible for what it plainly says. These twelve tribes are the children of Israel, the blood descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Further they are servants of our God. Some people seem to find this hard to understand. But the prophets were Jews, the Apostles were Jews, the writer of this book was a Jew, and Jesus was a Jew. Paul in Romans 9:3-5, speaks of “*those of my own race, 4 the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. 5 Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised*!” These are clearly Jews but could that many really be servants of God?

Paul went on to say in Romans 11:1-2 “*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. 2 God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew.* Then he speaks of something future. Romans 11:11-12 speaks of their fall and their fullness. “*I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles. 12 Now if their fall is riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness!”* NKJV

Paul speaks further of the restoration of the Jews in Romans 11:22-24 “*And they also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. 24 For if you were cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, who are natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?”* NKJV

I know that some people try to say that wherever the Bible says Israel it means the church and wherever it says the tribes of Israel it means Christian people. However, for me, it is hard to imagine when God mentions the twelve tribes by name that he really means Gentiles whether believer or not. There is certainly a sense in which a person can be a Jew outwardly but not be a participant in their spiritual calling. And one can be a Gentile, if they are a true believer, and be called “Abraham’s seed.” But I don’t know of any instance where the enumerated tribes of Israel could be thought of as the church universal gathered from throughout the world. In other places in Revelation where John wanted to describe the church universal he used language such as “*every tribe and language and people and nation.”*

I am inclined to read it for what it says. There will be at least 144,000 Jews from the tribes who are “*servants of our God*.” These are a distinct group separate from Jewish believers now. Indeed, they are a supplemental body added to the church itself, a particular class of believers who come out of Great Tribulation.

**But what happens to these Jews? What is this seal they receive?**

In the Bible, when people belong to God, a seal is placed upon them. In the Old Testament, it was physically illustrated in circumcision.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the New Testament it tended to be spiritual in nature. So for example in 2 Corinthians 1:21-22 Paul said “*Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, 22 set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.”*

In Ephesians 1:12-14 he says essentially the same thing only this time making it very clear that the Holy Spirit is that seal. “*And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal,* ***the promised Holy Spirit****, 14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession — to the praise of his glory.”*

Ephesians 4:30-32 adds to that. “*And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. 32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”* We are not only sealed by the Holy Spirit but we can have some impact upon that seal.

Similarly, Christ had God’s seal upon him. In John 6:27 Jesus speaks of himself as “*On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval."*  I presume this happened when the Father spoke from heaven and Holy Spirit came upon Jesus on the banks of the Jordan River.

When I read about these Jews who were sealed, I suspect that it must be some visible manifestation of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 2:16-21 Peter preached a sermon quoting the Old Testament prophet Joel. “*No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 17 "'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. 18 Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. 19 I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. 20 The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. 21 And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'*

You notice in verse 19 and beyond he gives a description unlike anything that has happened in history. He sets those events in the context of “*the great and glorious day of the Lord*.” That makes me think the outpouring of the Holy Spirit which is ramping up today will have an enlarged and special impact upon Jews in this period of Revelation. Amidst the severe mercy of God there will be a special outpouring upon the house of Jacob.

In other chapters of Revelation that seal seems to be more physical in nature. Revelation 9:4-5 “*They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads.”* It was the seal that protected them against harm. Having the seal they were safe. Without the seal they came to harm.

(Revelation **7**:9) “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. 10 And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." 11 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, 12 saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"

Here again we are joining John as he has the revelation of heaven itself. He sees a great crowd. By my calculation and interpretation of Revelation, this might be either the fourth distinct group of Christians or the sum of all those before. The first are those saved at the time of the rapture. The second are those of Revelation 6:9 “*When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained*.” Third, we had the 144,000 Jews from earlier in chapter 7. Now we have this great multitude.

They are from every nation, tribe, people and language. They are before the throne of God and before the Lamb. Their clothes of white with palm branches signal victory. Their songs sound out victory and salvation as they praise the Godhead. Even though they may have suffered defeat on the earth in that they are now in heaven, their song is one of victory. A passage like this helps us to think in terms of victory no matter what the circumstances on the earth.

**Palm branches** have a long history as a victory symbol. The Greek goddess of victory, Nike, had the palm as her symbol. In Israel it was a symbol of temporal victory and as a symbol of God’s ultimate victory. Palm branches were used during the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev 23:40), and eventually came to be used during other festivals. To worship God meant to wave the branches before the Lord. As time progressed, they stylized this waving by having it all happen at one time and the branches were waved toward the altar in the Temple. At least from the time of the Maccabees onward, the palm branch became a national symbol for Israel and was used to celebrate military victories. Further, the Jews knew the palm would have a future use that John highlights in the passage before us.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Jesus is the center of attention in the Revelation. When Jesus comes again, every eye will see him. Revelation 1:7 Says, “*Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him…”* What the Psalmist predicted is also being shown to John. “*Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock; you who sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh. Awaken your might; come and save us. Restore us, O God; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved*.”*[[5]](#footnote-5)*

Recall that Revelation is an account of Jesus reasserting his claim to the earth and its people. The palm branches and the words sung are indications that this is a heavenly victory celebration of what is happening on the earth.

When we wave the palm branch, we are declaring victory: Jesus is the Son of David. He has come in the name of the Lord. When we wave the palm we are blessing the One who is blessed.

## White Robed Saints. “*13 Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes-- who are they, and where did they come from?" 14 I answered, "Sir, you know." 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. 15 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. 16 Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. 17 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." (NIV)*

The hunger, thirst, and tears are an indication of the suffering in the great tribulation out of which this great multitude has come. They have not just experienced tribulation. They have come out of THE GREAT tribulation. There are two levels of tribulation. First is that which is common to the world. The second is the Great Tribulation of the end times.

It is apparent that these people have suffered. When Jesus spreads his tent over them, those old days are put behind them. There will be no more hunger, thirst, sun, and heat. Instead Jesus will lead them to refreshing springs of living water.

For whatever reason, this is the only place in the NIV translation where the word tribulation is used. In other places where the KJV previously used the word, they have used other terms. For example, where KJV has Jesus use the word tribulation, the NIV says, “*For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now-- and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.”[[6]](#footnote-6)*

Possibly they used words like distress in other places to distinguish those times from the period we know as the Tribulation.

Thank God this story ends with all tears being wiped away. There may be tears and tribulation for these saints for a time, but eventually the tears are gone.

We have met and considered heavenly folks in white robes before but I want to review them again here. Are these white-robed folks related to the white-robed saints in chapter 6 and to the white-robed saints of chapter 19.

We know that white robes are an indication of the righteous. In Daniel 7:9 that is how God himself is described. “*As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow*;”

The righteous people of God are described that way in Rev 3:4-6. “*Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. 5 He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. 6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*.”

It was the same message to the Laodicean church. Rev 3:17-18 “*I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness*;”

The twenty four elders also were dressed in white. Rev 4:4 “*Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads*.” The other angels are also described as dressed in white.

Revelation 19:6-8 is quite clear as the great multitude shouts "*Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. 7 Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. 8 Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear." (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)”*

The saints who followed the Lord in Rev 19:11-14 also were dressed in white. “*I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. 12 His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. 13 He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. 14 The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean.”*

**These saints indicate the spirit of the end times.** Lots of kindly and good people are inclined to think that the days of persecuting the church because of their religious principles are long since past, unless you follow the current news. The State of Washington is trying to force churches like ours to pay for abortions and fining them if they do not. Indeed, the great fear of gay marriage is not that someone can live their life in peace but that religious people will not be allowed to hold a different view but will be coerced into acceptance or face the penalty. Anti-God forces within the government have an evil interest in coercing Christians to act against their faith.

People who think the era of persecution of believers is past flatter themselves that the world has become too enlightened, too freedom loving, too humane, too civilized, and too much filled with a tolerant and reasonable spirit. The more paganism arises, the more we will return to the darkest of eras, the first three centuries after Christ and the more we lay the groundwork for these final end times events.

Their murderous intent is clear from reading Revelation 13:15-17. “*He was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that it could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed. 16 He also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, 17 so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name.*” NIV

Our text reminds us that many will come out of the great tribulation and that Christ’s kingdom will be asserted on the earth and will be victorious.

1. Ephesians 4:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Pulpit Commentary, volume 22, page 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rom 4:11 And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. NIV [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The coins of the Hasmonean period, when Israel became free under the Macabean revolt, had palm branches. Herod the Great used the palm as one of his symbols. Palm branches, associated with Nike, were symbols of victory in the Greco-Roman world. Festus, Governor of Judea when Paul was in prison, had his coin with the single palm. Antonius Felix under Cladius (52-60 AD) had the crossed palms. During the Jewish wars and the Bar Kokhva Revolt, it became the dominant Jewish symbol. In the Bar Kokhba (132-135 AD) revolt, most of the coins had a palm tree on them. Typically, they had a seven-branched palm. The Judea Capta coins issued by Rome after defeating the Jews in the first war showed a Jewish slave sitting under an eight branched palm tree. The symbols of the feast of Tabernacles also contributed to the attitude engendered by the feast itself. The Jewish sources also attribute to the lulav a special symbolic value. The Midrash on Leviticus 3:2 states: Israel go(es) forth from the presence of the Holy One, blessed be He, bearing their palm-branches and their citrons in their hands we know that it is Israel which is victorious, that Israel was successful in the judgment and that their iniquities were pardoned, and the nations exclaim: ‘Israel is victorious! [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Psalm 80:1-3 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Matt 24:21-22 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)