

Commentary on the Revelation

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How to approach the judgment section by the lamb upon the world of unbelievers, eventually crushing all opposition, has occasioned endless discussion and controversy. What can be said about this extended section is as follows:

- 1. The various judgments that are described, a cycle of three, are deeply interconnected with chapters four and five. Those chapters describe that fact of judgment to come and who is alone worthy to execute them resulting in the cleansing of the earth once more (remember Noah, remember the Babylonian Captivity), this time permanently as the book ends with God dwelling among His people forever in the new paradise of God. See also II Peter 3:7 (“...the present heavens and earth by His Word is being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.”)
- 2. It is clear that the three judgment cycles are interconnected because the seventh seal and the seventh trumpet led to the first triumph and bowl respectively.
- 3. It is also evident that each of the three judgment cycles end with salvation in the sense of protection or deliverance of God’s people. Through each of the three judgments sequences, redemption comes to God’s people and judgment on unbelievers.
- 1. The first cycle: the seal judgments, 6:1-8:5
 - a. The seven seals, 6:1-17
 - b. The first interlude, 7:1-17

Between the sixth and seventh seals, there is a parenthesis as with the trumpet and bowl judgments. Each parenthesis provides details concerning the saints that transpired during each complete cycle of judgments. The emphasis in the seal cycle is the spiritual protection and preservation of believers in the will of God during such tumultuous events. The passage seems to answer this question: What is the fate of believers during these terrible happenings? God will protect His people through shadowed tribulations as well as in the final one.

This chapter has two parts. It appears to envision two groups of people. In 7:1-8 Jewish believers are sealed with God's protective mercies *on earth* and in 7:9-17 a multitude of believer's praise God *in heaven* for His protective mercies accomplished.

1) The sealing of the 144,000 on earth, vv. 1-8

a) The withholding of the "four winds, v. 1

The phrase "four corners of the earth," four being a number that frequently signifies fullness or completeness, likely means simply the whole earth (see Jer. 4:36; Dan. 8:8, 11:40). The "four winds" are most likely the four horsemen of 6:1-8, the first four seals. Zechariah, whom John seems to be dependent upon at this juncture, identified the four horsemen in his vision with "four winds." Thus, the point of the verse is that angels are "holding back" evil forces so that the saints are spiritually protected from deception and given strength to endure difficult times. Evil will be completely destroyed with Jesus' return; He will not have the last word!!

b) The delaying of the "four winds, vv. 2-3

The reason the angels are instructed to stall the destruction of unbelievers is for the preservation of believers to bear witness effectively (see also 17:3 for the same idea). The identifying sign on the forehead of the saints is uncertain, but it should remind us of the preservation of God's ancient people in departing Egypt by the placing of blood on the doorposts of their homes (Exod. 12:1-32), though the idea is derived from Ezek. 9:4-6 where God's people are protected through a sign on their foreheads from coming judgment.

Those who have the seal in v. 3 are identified as those who possess the name of God and are God's "bond servants" (believers in this book and elsewhere are designated by this title). Thus, the seal has the connotation of ownership (ancient people placed marks on the foreheads of their slaves to verify ownership of them (the ownership by the beast [13:17] with a mark of the forehead is the counterfeit of the believer's mark of ownership). A parallel may be the plate that Aaron, the high priest, worn on his forehead signifying his devotion to service. In 14:1 the seal of ownership is mentioned, another is the mention of the 144,000, and the seal bears the name of the Lamb and "His Father."

The question at this point concerns the identity of the 144,000. While some commentators see that number as symbolic of the Church as a whole, Jewish and Gentile believers; it seems better to take the phrase "from

every tribe of Israel (v. 4) to literally mean believing Jews. What John is arguing, then, is that God made promises to the Jews that God will preserve ethnic Israel from extinguishment, even in the worst of times (we have had shadowed tragedies such as the persecutions suffered throughout the Medieval Period, the late 19th century programs in Russia, the holocausts perpetrated by the Nazi regime, and rampant antisemitism today, as well as the final attempt to destroy the Jews in the Great Tribulation [“the great day of God’s wrath,” 6:17]).

c) The delineation of the protected, vv. 4-8

Why John uses the figure of 144,000 is uncertain; the figure is the multiple of twelve multiplied by one thousand (could it represent the notion of completeness [twelve tribes signifying the whole of God’s ancient people]?).

Note: This would be a helpful insight in John’s day when believing Jews may have feared that turning to the Gentiles, the blurring of them as one people, the Church, implied that God would keep His ancient promise to Israel to other than Israel. God will preserve the remnant of His people, true Israel, the Israel of faith, and restore them when He comes to reign on the earth! The inclusion of Gentiles does not mean the exclusion of the Jews from God’s program and promises!

What is striking is that the first on the list of tribes is Judah (Gen 49:8-10), not Reuben, Jacob’s firstborn. Two reasons may account for this: first, placing Judah first lays the background for the most prominent descendant in the book, Jesus Christ (5:5), and second, a son of Judah (Gen 49:10) would secure the “obedience of the peoples.” It is through Judah’s greater son that blessing would come to the nations (5:5, 9).

If the 144,000 is a general and symbolic term for all the peoples of God, all being protected for their testimony to Christ during their lives, why do we have the subsequent listing of the tribes and the noting of twelve thousand from each? The context of the numbering of the ancient people was to prepare them for battle against God’s enemies (it is for those “who follow the lamb wherever He goes [14:4]).”

Parenthesis: Is the number to be taken literally?

- 1. The number is a round number equally so for each tribe which would be a precedent since that was never the case in any listings.*
- 2. The number is a multiple of twelve, the biblical number of organization and ten, or multiples thereof completion or fullness.*

3. *Dan is omitted, for unknown reasons, from the list and Ephraim is replaced with Joseph (v. 8). Levi is added through they were allotted no territory by Joshua, their portion being the Lord. A Jewish person would be alert that symbolism is an issue here. We have noted above that Judah is out of the normal order of the tribes.*
4. *The NT, on occasion, does describe the church in terms that were used of Israel (Rom 2:28-29, 4:11, 6:8; Gal. 3:29, 6:16; Phil 3:3). In the Revelation (1:6) the church is addressed by a title used of Israel in Exodus 19:4-6.*

Therefore, the 144,000 should be taken symbolically (v. 4), but the referent is believing Israel. Despite the fact that order and omissions are evident, the emphasis is upon ethnic, believing Israel as a whole.

- 2) The praise of saints in heaven for preservation, vv. 9-17
The point of this paragraph is a change of scene, a second vision, from an activity on the earth (preservation) to the response of those in heaven (praise, victory, exaltation).
 - a) Multitudes before the throne, v. 9
The phrase “after these things,” does not suggest a chronological sequence of events, a temporal linearity, as it does simply that John perceived another, later vision (for example, 6:12-17 depicts the final judgment so that these visions come before though they are stated after). However, the two visions must be distinguished. These are believers in the Lamb (Jew and Gentile) who have finished the race, no longer threatened by the “Great Tribulation (v. 14); they are sheltered and blessed by God forever! These are from “every nation and tribes and peoples and tongues.”

The heavenly scene, multitudes before the throne of God in heaven, is drawn from the background of the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev 23:40-43). “Palm branches” suggest the ancient custom of the making of booths and together celebrate the faithfulness of God.

- b) Worship about the throne, vv. 10-12
Multitudes in heaven, the race accomplished, celebrate the faithfulness of God through their “wilderness,” joining a vast angelic host, praising the Lord for His redemptive mercies. You find the same reaction in the heavenly scenes of 4:8-11 and 5:8-14.

The heavenly host worship God and the Lamb (v. 9) praising Him for seven characteristics (the number symbolic of completeness). It begins and concludes with “Amen.”

- c) Ministry around the throne, vv. 13-17
 - (1) The declaration of an angel, vv. 13-14

John is told who those joining in worship are; they are the redeemed that have come through the “wilderness.” The presence of an article (“the”) before “great tribulation” indicates that the referent is to those who specifically have come out of the latter part of the tribulation (Jesus understood tribulation to be part of the inter-advent period [John 16:33] and culminating in a great and terrible judgment). The phrase, “the great tribulation” only occurs here and in Matt 24:21.

The question of most importance concerns the identity of those who are clothed in white robes? John is befuddled and simply says that only God knows (Ezekiel’s answer to the dry bones [37:3]). These are those who have come out of the final escalation of judgment (“the great tribulation” [v. 14], “the great day of their wrath” [6:17], “the hour of testing which is about to come upon the whole world,” [3:10]). It seems best to see these as saints who either died naturally or had been martyred in the seven-year “Great Tribulation.”

Note: While we will not experience the “day of God’s wrath, the “great tribulation,” the seal judgments, we all experience “shadows of it in the death of loved ones, severe illness, family dysfunction and derelictions, and “accidents.” Thus, this chapter is very comforting to us because, if God preserves His people through the worst of times, God will surely protect us in the mere, but painful, shadows!!

The metaphor of being washed in the blood of the lamb is that of forgiveness of sin. It is interesting that the opposite is said of some in the church at Sardis (3:4); they have “soiled their garments,” meaning they have compromised their witness to Christ.

(2) The basis of the declaration, v. 15

The “whited robe” symbolizes righteousness; they have not polluted their garments with compromise. They have proven faithful in suffering (obedience is not a cause of privilege; it is the consequence of privilege). Their purity, evidenced by their perseverance, is the basis of their entrance into the presence of the lamb.

“Temple” is likely a metaphor for the presence of God, the place of His “throne.”

“Night-and-day” is a figure of speech for unending worship. In the realm of the presence of God time is not reckoned.

(3) The blessings of the declaration, vv. 16-17

These verses denote the blessings that the saints will enjoy in the eternal presence of God. Not only will they compose a new priesthood, those who do spiritual service, they will no longer experience tribulation. God will “spread His tent,” His protective mercies, over them who will shepherd and nourish His people; there will be no more tears (pain, anguish, loss). See Isa. 25:8, Rev 21:1-4. The “spreading of God’s tent” is an allusion to the cloud that covered the ancient people during the wilderness wanderings.

The reason deprivation and hunger will no longer exist for them is that the “Lamb” will shepherd them. “God will wipe away every tear from their [*our*] eyes” (v. 17, 21:4, 22:3). See Rev. 21-22 for the description of God’s protection of us.

Applications

1. As one reads this chapter, the most striking truth is that God’s protective mercies limit what Satan and His minions can do to us.
Though we find ourselves in tragic and uncertain circumstances, the confidence we have, our security, our assurance, is that God’s hand is upon us. We are God’s children having been granted the seal, the surety of God by means of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Nothing can happen to us that will destroy that seal! Saints have faced enormous complexities, some even death, but nothing can separate us from our secure certainty that we are God’s children and that we shall one day be called into His presence blameless and holy forever. Troubles are not good for our wellbeing, but pain and torment, when all seems uncertain, is bearable. We are people of hope that gives us perspective on our daily experiences. Is this not true for you also?
2. Our passage offers an excellent opportunity to understand how the NT writers read the OT Scriptures. Here the background is the Feast of Tabernacles, an annual celebration in the history of Israel, rehearsed the protective mercies of God through the wilderness journey even it was caused by their own dereliction (disobedience may be the occasion for God to extend unusual mercies). That experience became for John in this chapter an illustration of the meaning of sealing. The seal on believers is the guarantee of God’s care and protection of His children. Do you sense a reason to celebrate the “Feast of Tabernacles,” God- among-His-people in your life?
3. If God’s sealing, protective mercies have been granted to His children, what does that tell us about the nature of our life experience? Does it not tell us that we are in need of protection? Does it not tell us that danger lurks about us? In what sense are we experiencing threat? In the context of the description of the seven churches is it not idolatry, the quest to find ultimate satisfaction in anything other than God (materialism’s false security, the god of pleasure, the goddess of health)? Is it not the pull of cultural compromise, the lure of success?
4. The collectivity of God’s people, the church, is a vast gathering of peoples from the nations and ethnicities; it a group without respect to financial and cultural privilege. We are all called “bond servants” which means those who have entered into voluntary servitude rather than involuntary servitude (slaves). The wonder of the gift of life through a divine redeemer sent from heaven has changed our priorities and affections. Do you see your life as a follower of Christ the joyful delight of involuntary servitude or the depressing experience of the loss of freedom and slavery?

5. The picture presented to us in this passage of the saints in heaven is breathtaking. The image of white robes is that of being clothed in righteousness. The waving of palm branches reminds the OT reader of the tabernacle, the provisions of God in our “the wilderness”. The waving of palms would also remind them of the recognition of a new king that ultimately finds its fulfillment in the triumphal entry of Jesus. This tells us that we will worship God endlessly in heaven as our true and forever “King of kings.” Does not the reality of heaven lift your burdens today? When the times force you to look down, have you learned to look up? Think about what is in store for you, a white robe and active worship forever! After the era of our “tribulations,” we will see the Lamb of God!
6. The image of “washed robes” is that of cleansing. The cleansing described in our passage is with blood (blood stains; it does not cleanse). However, here is another image. We have been cleansed through the sacrificial death of the true Lamb, Jesus Christ. His life giving for us, in our place, is the cause of our white robes, our righteousness. Can you thank Him ever enough? There seems to be at least two reasons why heaven is forever: 1) the depth of our need and God’s provision is so great that forever will not exhaust our expression of gratitude and 2) the profoundness of the gift procured by the Lamb can never be fully described. Can you thank Him enough?
7. Think about how our chapter ends with a poignant description of heaven. God will wipe away every tear from our eyes and every negative memory that caused them. Should not our future have some impact in defining how we are to live today? Do your tears bring forth hope? There will be a day when they will all be past and the memory of them will not exist. Why? Because something more valuable, beautiful, and enduring will fill our eyes with such delight that blighted things will be displaced by only lovely things such as the person of the Lamb. What consumes you, confining and painful memories or thoughts of heaven? Comfort in this life is a matter of what you think about, what you meditate upon. What do you most think about?