



“Till we have sealed the servants of God”

Revelation 7:1-3

The opening of the first six seals sets before us scenes that would shake our souls. The first seal is opened and the gospel goes forth conquering and to conquer; it goes forth and it kills, even as it makes alive. The second seal is opened and much blood is shed upon the earth. The third seal is opened and the earth is ravaged with famine. The fourth seal is opened and death visits the earth, with Hades in its wake. The fifth seal is opened and we learn the lot of the church as we hear the cry of the martyrs,

“How long, O Lord, holy and true until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”

Those martyrs are told to rest and wait until *“both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed.”* The sixth seal is opened and we read of the conflagration of creation itself as the Day of Wrath comes. The opening of the first six seals sets before us scenes that would shake our souls.

So horrific and terrible are the scenes of the first six seals we hardly dare consider the opening of the seventh seal. If the first six seals leave mankind crying out for the rocks and the mountains to fall upon them, what will the seventh seal bring? If the first six seals leave man with the terrifying question, “Who is able to stand?” what will the seventh seal bring? If the first six seals would shake our souls, what will the seventh seal bring? We hardly dare consider the opening of the seventh seal. We expect to have set before us new horrors and terrors that would shake us so profoundly, they would leave us undone.

Instead, we come to an interlude. While the sixth seal is opened at the end of Chapter 6, the seventh seal is not opened until the beginning of Chapter 8. Chapter 7 then is interposed between the sixth seal and the seventh seal. Chapter 7 is a break in the action — an interruption in the drama.

In this article we want to consider the first three verses of that interlude. In those three verses we read of four angels, verse 1; of another angel, verse 2; and of the command given to the four angels by the fifth angel, verse 3.

The four angels

Consider first the four angels of verse 1. *“After these things I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, on the sea, or on any tree.”*

Who are these four angels? What is their significance? What are we to make of them?

The number four, we have seen, corresponds to the four corners of the earth, the four winds of the earth. In fact, such things are mentioned here in verse 1, *“I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth.”* In view, then, is that which is universal — that which affects the entire earth. Whatever we make of these angels, at the least we must understand that they have significance for the whole world. They stand at the four corners of the earth, and they hold the four winds of the earth.

The four winds which they hold in their hands have in view judgment. That is confirmed from verses 2 and 3. In verse 2 we are told that the four angels have been granted the power to harm the earth and the sea. In verse 3 they are expressly told not to harm the earth, the sea, or the trees.

These four angels have the power to harm the earth. They have the power to bring God's judgments upon the earth. That is the significance of the wind. And what an apt description! Think of the destruction wind has brought upon the earth. You have heard of the damage caused by tornadoes sweeping through Midwest towns, destroying homes, claiming lives. You have seen the footage of hurricanes in the Caribbean claiming thousands of lives. The wind signifies judgment. The four angels, standing at the four corners of the earth, hold in their hands the four winds of the earth. They have been granted the power to bring God's judgments upon the earth.

All of this should sound somewhat familiar. Consider it: four angels corresponding to the four corners of the earth and associated with judgment. Where have we seen such imagery before: four creatures, described in angelic terms, corresponding to the four corners of the earth, and associated with judgment? Where have we seen such imagery before?

The four living creatures! Remember the four living creatures described in angelic terms? Remember Revelation 4:6-8, where the four living creatures correspond to the four corners of the earth? Remember Revelation 6:1-8, where the four living creatures are associated with judgment, even the riding forth of the four horsemen of the apocalypse?

There is a correspondence between the four living creatures and the four angels of Revelation 7:1-3. They share the same number: there are four living creatures, there are four angels. They share the same significance: both correspond to the four corners of the earth. They share association with judgment: the four living creatures with the horseman of the apocalypse, the four angels with the four winds. While not identical with one another, there is, nevertheless, this correspondence between the four living creatures and the four angels of Revelation 7:1-3.

We have been insisting all along that the four living creatures are symbolic of the office of preaching. Preachers are messengers; they are heralds; they are emissaries; they are ambassadors; they are sent not with their own message, but with the message of God. What are angels? They are messengers; they are heralds; they are emissaries; they are ambassadors; they are sent not with their own message, but with the message of God.

Are you beginning to see the correspondence between the four angels of Revelation 7:1-3 and the four living creatures, symbolic of the officer of preaching? As there are heavenly messengers (the four angels of Revelation 7:1-3), so there are earthly messengers (the four living creatures)! As there are heavenly heralds, so there are earthly heralds! As there are heavenly emissaries, so there are earthly emissaries! As there are heavenly ambassadors, so there are earthly ambassadors! As it is in heaven, so it is on earth!

The four angels, then, have in view the company of the preachers. The gospel goes forth to the ends of the earth, and as it goes forth to the ends of the earth, the earth is visited with judgment.

The fifth angel

Consider now verse 2, *"Then I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God. And he cried with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea."*

Who is this angel and what is his significance? We know two things about him. We know his origin and we know his activity.

First, his origin. He ascends from the east. The Greek says literally, that he ascends *"from the rising of the sun."* This angel is magnificent in his description. He ascends. As he ascends from the rising of the sun, so he shines like the sun. His description is Christ-like. As Christ ascended, so this angel ascends. As Christ was risen as the sun of righteousness with healing in His wings, so

this angel ascends from the rising of the sun. His description is Christ-like. It is an angel overlaid with the image of Christ. To be sure, he is not the Christ, but he is in the likeness of Christ.

Second, his activity. We are told that he has the seal of the living God. It has been granted to him to seal the servants of God. This angel, then, is magnificent in description. He stands out above the four angels. He is unique. He is special. In fact, we meet him in his unique activity in several other places in Revelation.

We read in chapter 22:6, *“And the Lord God of the holy prophets sent His angel to show His servants the things which must shortly take place.”*

We read again in chapter 22:16, *“I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things in the churches.”*

We read in Revelation 1:1, *“The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants — things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John.”*

All of this seems to be indicating that there is, in the angelic realm, a hierarchy of angels. There is the common company of angels, represented by the four angels of verse 1. And then there is the angel that stands out over and above the company of angels in verse 2.

We have already seen with the four angels that as it is in heaven, so it is on earth. As there are heavenly messengers, so there are earthly messengers. As there are heavenly heralds, so there are earthly heralds. The company of angels in heaven have their correspondence in the company of preachers on the earth. As it is in heaven, so it is on earth.

Now take that one step further. There is this correspondence between the angels in heaven and the preachers on earth. Does it follow, then, that as there is a hierarchy among the angels in heaven, so there is also a hierarchy among the preachers on earth? Indeed, there is! There is a hierarchy among the preachers on earth! What is that hierarchy? Look again at 1:1-2, *“The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants — things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John, who bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw.”* To whom does the special angel match up? To whom does the unique angel match up? He matches up to John. And who was John? He was an Apostle!

In heaven you have the common company of angels, and then you have the special angel! On earth you have the common company of preachers, and then you have the Apostles! In heaven the special angel stands out over and above the common company of angels! On earth the Apostles stand out over and above the common company of preachers! As it is in heaven, so it is on earth!

The implication of the angels

Let us draw out some of the implications of this. What is it that set the apostles apart? They were those who had seen Christ, and more specifically, they were those who had seen the risen Christ. They were also sent by Christ to bring His message. “But what of the Apostle Paul?” you ask. “He never saw the risen Christ.” Yes he did. Remember the road to Damascus? Remember what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15? In speaking of the risen Christ, he writes, *“After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.”* Paul saw the risen Christ. To be sure, he did not see Him as the other apostles saw Him, but he did see Him. Paul saw Him after He ascended into heaven, that is why Paul says *“I am one abnormally born.”* Paul is the last one to see the risen Christ. Thus Paul is the last of the apostles. After Paul, there are no more apostles. When Paul gives instruction to his young friend Timothy, he makes no mention of Timothy being an apostle; he simply calls him a preacher.

What was the apostolic ministry? Very simply, their ministry was to preach Christ. What does Peter do on Pentecost? He preaches Christ. What does Paul say in Romans 1:16? *“I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ!”* What does he say in 1 Corinthians 2:2? *“I determined not to know*

anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified!" What does he say in 1 Corinthians 9:16? *"Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!"* What does he say in 2 Corinthians 4:5? *"We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord!"* What does he say in Galatians 1:9? *"Even if we, or an angel from heaven (very interesting connection there!), preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed!"* The ministry of the apostles was the ministry of Christ! They preached Christ!

What, then, is the role of the common company of preachers? Theirs is the ministry of the apostles. Theirs is the ministry of Christ. They are called to preach the Word! Paul commands Timothy to preach the Word! They are called to preach Christ! Preachers must preach Christ if the church is to be built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the Chief Cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20). A preacher who does not preach Christ may be many things — he may be a fine story teller, he may be a fine entertainer, he may be a polished speaker — but he is no preacher! He does not stand in the line of the apostles. He does not proclaim the gospel of Christ.

The servants of God sealed

All of this, then, brings us back to the command of verses 2b-3:

"And he cried with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, saying, 'Do not harm the earth, the sea, or the trees till we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.'"

The common company of preachers cannot proclaim the Word of God — that Word which brings judgment upon the earth — until the servants of God have been sealed. The question, then, is, "when are the servants of God sealed?"

In a very real sense, the servants of God were sealed at the cross. There our sins were paid for! There our sins were removed! There the wrath of God was placated! There the justice of God was satisfied! There the payment was made! There it was said, *"It is finished!"* There our redemption was purchased! There we were sealed! Redemption has been accomplished! We were sealed at the cross.

But in another sense we are sealed as redemption is applied to us. We are sealed as God effectually calls us, regenerating our hearts, granting us the gift of faith and repentance, declaring us not guilty, adopting us as His sons and heirs, sanctifying us in holiness, and preserving us through union with Christ even unto glory itself! We were sealed at the cross, but that seal is then applied to us in time by the Holy Spirit through the Word. In that connection, I remind you of Ephesians 1:13-14,

"In Him you also trusted, after you heard the Word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory."

Do you see now how it all fits together? The Apostles proclaimed Christ — they were eyewitnesses of the risen Christ, sent by Christ Himself with the message of the cross. The Apostles passed on their ministry to the common company of preachers — they are called to proclaim the message of the cross; they are called to proclaim Christ. And as Christ is proclaimed by the common company of preachers, God's Word works, bringing judgment upon the wicked even as it seals the people of God.

Our Catechism puts it most beautifully in Question and Answer 54,

"What do you believe concerning the 'Holy Catholic Church'? I believe that the Son of God, through His Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for Himself, a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith. And of this community I am, and always will be, a living member."

It is the ministry of the Word, in line with that of the Apostles, that seals the people of God. The Son of God gathers, protects, and preserves for Himself a community chosen for eternal life, this He does through His Spirit and Word.

Do you see what confidence is yours?! Through the ministry of the Word — that ministry that stands in line with the ministry of the apostles — you are gathered, you are protected, you are preserved! Through the ministry of the Word you are sealed!

The opening of the first six seals sets before us scenes that would shake our souls. We can only imagine what the opening of the seventh seal will bring us. If the first six seals would shake our souls, what will the seventh seal bring? The opening of the seals would shake our souls.

They would shake our souls, except for the fact that we are given this interlude in Chapter 7. Here we are told, as the children of God, the church of Jesus Christ, that we are sealed! We are sealed in the face of present judgment. We are sealed in the face of the judgment to come. We are sealed in the blood of the Lamb. We are sealed by His Word.

*How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!
What more can He say than to you He has said,
to you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?
The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to his foes; that soul,
though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no never, no never, forsake!*

Brian Vos

© 2015

www.christianstudylibrary.org