

# 13

REVELATION 7 – 8: 5

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## THE CHURCH IS SEALED TO SURVIVE THE TRIBULATION

In Revelation 6 we saw how God’s wrath begins to demolish his creation, when Christ opens the sixth seal of the scroll. When that happens all the people in the world, the powerful and the lowly, the rich and the poor, they all panic. It is a horrible experience. They get so scared that in despair they call out: “Who is able to stand in the judgment of God? Who can survive this ordeal?”

In the mouth of these frightened callers it sounds like a rhetorical question, with the suggested answer: “Of course, no one can. This is just too terrible.”

But that is not true. In Revelation 7 John will hear an answer. God is going to respond, so that we may know and will not despair; so that we may have hope, no matter how dark the world may become, even if the whole world comes crashing down.

God is going to respond with the vision of his redeemed, standing before the throne in heaven and in front of the Lamb Jesus Christ.

You could call this chapter an interlude; a narrative, embedded in the discourse of the scroll that was sealed with the seven seals. It is sandwiched, so

to speak, between the events at the opening of the sixth seal and the opening of the seventh seal. It interrupts – and in so doing, slows down – the progress in the work of Christ to activate the content of the scroll, God’s plan for the final phase of history.

This is not unique here. A similar pattern of high-speed events, followed by a slowing down of the progress, occurs between the moments that the sixth and seventh trumpets are sounded. The one is in Rev.9:13 and the next one in 11:15.

But these are not just incidents. It is God’s purpose to draw our attention to things that are crucially important to be aware of at those specific moments.

When total destruction seems to be inescapable, God wants to comfort and encourage his people by showing that his faithful servants are sealed. They are protected in the midst of his judgments, no matter how great the tribulation may be.

This means a dramatic delay for the opening of the seventh seal. But we will get there!

## A FIXED NUMBER

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When the frightening sounds and screams of all the turmoil that came with the opening of the sixth seal are fading out, you can imagine that John is still thinking of this desperate cry: “Who can stand on the great day of the wrath of God and of the Lamb.....?”

But then a different scene unfolds in his vision. He sees four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth. The earth does not have real corners, of course, but think North, East, South and West. By doing this, these angels prevent unrestricted violence from destroying the whole earth.

We have seen the terrible devastation that was the result of the powers that broke loose after the sixth seal was opened. And now we are waiting for the seventh seal. There must be more to come. What will it be like? Is the

violence of God's final judgment going to break loose in full force now? If it happens, there will be no escape.

We know how much damage can be caused by violent hurricanes and tornados. We do not have a lot of experience with this in Canada, but in the US they do. Think of hurricane Katrina in the south, in 2005, and a few years later hurricane Sandy in New York. Well, here these strong, destructive winds from all directions are symbolic of God's judgments that are still coming.

And these four angels have the power, the authority to do this, to let those winds loose. But they do not. At least, not yet! It is like God Almighty has his finger on the button that will trigger the final explosion, but he does not push it. At least, not yet!

But why not? What is holding him back?

Then John sees another angel, coming up from the east, like the sun. He seems to usher in a new, bright day. That sounds hopeful. This angel has with him *the seal of the living God*. In those days, the impression of a seal in wax signified ownership and promises protection. In other words, with this particular seal of God people could be 'marked'. And this marking would suggest that you belong to the God who is life, who gives life and guarantees life. This marking would mean you do not need to worry, he will protect you.

Well, in order to do this marking, the angel with the seal needs time. And so, we hear him call out to the four angels in a loud voice: *Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads*. He is talking about all the believers of all times and places. And we find out that, because of them, the Lord shows patience. Think of what Peter says in 2 Peter 3. *The Lord is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish*.

Indeed, God is holding back the calamities of the final judgment to safeguard the protection of his people. He is still gathering his church. This delay of his judgment gives room for the sealing of all those who are his; all those who will be able to stand on the day that the storms of his wrath will be blowing in full force.

It says that this seal will be *on the foreheads of God's people*. When something is on your forehead everyone can see it. In this way the “servants of God” can be distinguished from the “followers of the beast”, who we meet in Rev. 13. In 13:16 (see also 19:20) these people also receive marks on their foreheads. And so, we discover that all people are marked. No one is free, either you belong to the living God, or you belong to his enemy. You bear either God's seal or the mark of the beast.

We understand that this ‘seal on your forehead’ will protect you, but we don't really know what it looks like. In Rev. 14:1 it says that the 144,000 *had the name of the Lamb and his Father's name written on their foreheads*. But that does not help either. Unless you think that it is a literal symbol in the form of a brand or tattoo, or something like that, on your forehead. But that is unlikely.

The best solution is to see those seals as things that become visible in your life, as things that reflect your values or beliefs. That means, if you are sealed with the ‘seal of the living God’ you are going to live so that others can see that you belong to God and Jesus Christ. With the seal of God, others can identify you as a Christian. This seal shows that Jesus Christ owns you, that you trust in him to protect you, and that you are willing and ready to worship him and live for him every day.

This is the seal that guarantees your protection in God's coming judgment. To be sure, we are talking about “spiritual protection”. Throughout Revelation it is clear that Christians will not always escape physical harm and danger. Many have suffered and will suffer persecution. Some have to die for their faith. Indeed, believers will not escape their share of trouble and misery. But they will survive.

It is the Holy Spirit who gives this seal. In 2 Cor. 1:22 the apostle Paul connects Christ's *seal of ownership* with *the Holy Spirit in our hearts*. And Eph. 1:13 says that when you believe, *in Christ you were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit*. And this seal protects you, it says in Eph. 4:30, *for the day of redemption*.

So, yes, when you believe God's promises and you embrace Jesus as your Saviour, the Holy Spirit seals you. And then the Holy Spirit will also take care of you, so that you can keep it up, and can stand on the day of God's

wrath. This is so encouraging. Sometimes we worry about these things but for those who belong to Christ, there is no need to be anxious.

Here in North America we are not persecuted, presently. But if that would come, would you be able to keep it up? Would you dare to show the seal on your forehead, or would you rather hide it? Would you trust him who has sealed you? Sometimes you wonder about that. And without persecution, you face the many attractive temptations in this world. Would you let your 'seal' determine your choices?

And what about our children in this increasingly secular and often hostile world? How are they going to handle the many temptations and challenges, and the pressure to assimilate? Keep telling yourself and your kids that in his grace the Lord has sealed you and them through the Holy Spirit with the seal of his ownership.

In Revelation 7 John does not see the sealing, but he hears the result. He hears the exact number of those who were sealed: *144,000 from every tribe of the sons of Israel*. What he sees later on (in v.9) looks different, an incalculable multitude from everywhere. The question, 'are these groups the same, or are they distinct from each other?', has triggered many different ideas and opinions.

Now remember what we have seen before. It is important to know that what John hears and what he sees may seem different, while it is actually the same thing. But then the same thing characterized from two different points-of-view that complement each other, and sometimes interpret each other. In this case, what he hears is the inner reality, the spiritual reality, and what he sees is the outward reality.

The number that John hears, 144,000, is a symbolic but fixed number that represents the full number of those who belong to God. It all starts in the Old Testament. That is why they are called "God's Israel". The basic unit is twelve, which is the number of Israel's patriarchs. But as God's saving work expands in the time of the New Testament, we also see twelve apostles. And so the entire church of Old and New Testament can be represented by  $12 \times 12 = 144$ .

However, this is multiplied by 1000. That tells us that, in the end, the spiritual reality of the church of God is a large, but perfectly harmonious and completely unified community.

This spiritual reality is also emphasized when we hear that the 144,000 are equally divided. The exact same number of sealed servants of God comes from each of the 12 tribes of Israel. This fixed structure suggests again that the numbers are symbolic and reflect the fullness and completion of God's people.

In Rev. 14:4 it says that these 144,000 *follow the Lamb wherever he goes*. So, we are talking about faithful, dedicated followers of Jesus Christ, Christian believers from everywhere, from Jews and Gentiles. The glorified Christ owns them and promises to protect them. This again makes the number 144,000 a symbolic number that represents the full and fixed number of all God's children, of all times and places.

This eliminates other views of who these 144,000 are. Some think they are believers from Jewish background only. Then they read the name 'Israel' and of the tribes as referring to the literal, physical Israel. Or they take the number literally and think of a limited spiritual elite of martyrs, separate from the 'great multitude', which John is seeing in v.9.

But in the New Testament the name 'Israel' is used more often for the whole church of Jesus Christ. God's New Testament church continues to be built on the old foundation that was laid in the Old Testament history of God's covenant with Abraham and Israel. And as the New Testament church grows and expands, God fulfills the many promises in the words of the Old Testament prophets.

In the same way, the roll call in the v.5 – 8 tells us that God's old promises of the reunion of the twelve tribes, as you find it in the prophecies of Isaiah and Ezekiel, are fulfilled in the church of Jesus Christ. All of God's believers are sealed and accounted for. Christ finishes his gathering project and reaches its fixed number. God's people are complete. They will not perish in the judgement but stand on the day of God's wrath.

## TOO MANY TO COUNT

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Then, when John looks, he sees something different from what he just heard. He sees a huge crowd, *a great multitude that no one could number*. This is the outward reality. The complete Israel of God, symbolized by the fixed number 144,000, includes all who follow Jesus Christ from all over the entire world. God knows them all, but for us there are just too many to count.

This is not a picture of the Christian church John was familiar with in the time that this book was written. No, in his vision the apostle sees the complete fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham, when in Genesis 15:5 the LORD took Abraham outside, and said, *Look toward heaven and number the stars – if indeed you are able to number them. So shall your offspring be*. That must have been awesome to behold.

I want to emphasize again that this is the same group as the 144,000 in v.4. They are identical but seen from a different perspective. The different things John hears and sees complement each other. We have seen the same in Rev. 5: John hears 'lion' (v.5), but he sees 'a lamb' (v.6). Here we see the amazing magnitude of the final results when God gathers and seals the fixed number we have heard.

They come from *every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages*. In other words, the total sum of all believers from all over the globe is incredibly multi-cultural. Every ethnic, cultural, and linguistic group or category in the world is present in the church. An astonishingly numerous people of God is being prepared for its final destination, a new earth.

How significant is the Christian church nowadays? Sure – worldwide Christians are still the largest religious group. But how optimistic are we about its future, especially in the West? However, the final result of all mission and evangelism, all church-planting and discipling is breath-taking. It blows you away, this glorious vision of the church as it shall dwell forever in the immediate presence of God and of his throne.

Indeed, in contrast to those who try to hide in caves and under rocks on the day of God's wrath, these Christians will *stand before the throne of God and before the Lamb*.

As mentioned earlier, the terrified question in Rev. 6:17, “who can stand?” sounds rhetorical. “Of course, no one can. It’s just not possible!”

But here is the surprise: a huge crowd of people, standing before the throne of God. Who can stand before the almighty God? Who can face him on the day of his wrath, without being terrified? The church can. Yes, sealed on your forehead by the Holy Spirit, you will find yourself among the great multitude that by God’s grace can and will survive the tribulation AND the last judgment.

How is that possible? Look! They are all *clothed in white robes and with palm branches in their hands*. We have seen those white robes before, as a display of purity and righteousness, as well as a sign of victory.

And the ‘palm branches’ indicate what kind of victory this is. John 12:13 is the only other time in the New Testament that we see ‘palm branches’ in people’s hands. That is during Jesus’ festive entry into Jerusalem.

In other words, the great multitude is celebrating the victory of Jesus Christ. It is his sacrifice on the cross that makes all this possible. That is also why they glorify and praise God for his wonderful deliverance..... *crying out with a loud voice* (v.10). Here is another ‘loud voice’. It gets pretty noisy again.

Quite often folks from different tribes and nations that speak different languages do not trust each other and cannot get along in this world. But that is going to be different in the church. We all learn to sing in unity and harmony about our gracious salvation from sin and Satan. *Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!* Praise God as you follow the Lamb. He protects and guides you as he leads you on the new exodus, into the new Promised Land. In his grace he will safely steer you through trials and dangers.

Then all the heavenly throne-attendants we have seen in Rev. 4 & 5 join in. They are ready to worship the Holy God when they see and hear the exuberant praise of this magnificent mega church-choir. Two ‘amens’ in v.12 bracket a powerful six-fold glorification of the holy God. They affirm the praise of the church (v.10) for bringing the complete number of his children safely home.

Then one of the elders comes up to John with a few questions. “Tell me”, he says, “this crowd that you see here, *who are they and from where have they come?*” That is not because he does not know. He is going to answer his own questions. But engaging John in this dialogue is a teaching-tool to have John focus his attention on the very heart of what is happening.

The elder then identifies this huge multitude as people *who are coming out of the great tribulation*. There are a variety of views on this ‘great tribulation’. Many think of it as a final period of severe persecution, shortly before Jesus’ second coming. But it is not only a future reality. The whole period of the last days, that begins with Jesus’ first coming, and will continue until his return, is a time of various trials for God’s people. First here, then there, believers of all times and places are faced with oppression.

God’s children do not escape this tribulation, but they will pass through it, come out of it, and survive. And this comfort, this encouragement is not only for later. No, it was for God’s children in the past and it is also for God’s children that suffer today. In the midst of the reality of the great tribulation today, Jesus Christ encourages us by showing us the reality from his perspective, from above.

So, then, how did they survive? And how do we survive today? *They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb*. This is powerful symbolism. Having your sin-stained robes bleached in the blood of Christ symbolizes your freedom from sin and guilt. God’s grace in Jesus’ sacrifice will get you undamaged through whatever tribulation comes your way.

Christ won the victory. Believe in him, follow him, and share in his victory. Then one day you will find yourself standing before the throne of God and in front of the Lamb. Then look around and all that you will see is this great multitude that no one can count.

And, as the elder outlines, the future of this great multitude is bright. Those who place their confidence in Christ will worship before God’s throne and in his temple day and night. You will enjoy uninterrupted fellowship with the holy and almighty God. He will shelter his people so that the dangers of your journey through this world will no longer threaten you (v.16). He will

bring his children home, all of them, no matter how difficult the road is. Just follow the Lamb as your shepherd.

The last verses of Rev. 7, v.15–17 reflect already the new reality of your final destination, the new earth, as it is more fully pictured in Rev. 21. Under the caring love and guidance of the Lamb, life will be good, happy, prosperous, full of grace and peace. And no more tears, ever again!

What a contrast with the chaos at the end of Rev. 6.

This would be a wonderful, comforting and encouraging way to end this vision.

But we have one question left.

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## **P**RAYING FOR JUDGMENT

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What about the last, the seventh seal? John is still waiting. And so are we. Waiting to get the full picture of what is written in the scroll. Just when, at the end of Rev. 6, the end seems to be around the corner, the pace slows down. As readers and listeners, we all get the opportunity to catch our breath.

But then there is the seventh seal. Suddenly, without warning, the pace accelerates again. Are we now ready for the climax of Jesus' second coming?

When the Lamb opens the seventh seal, expectations run high. This is the last one! Is this the climax? Will this be the deathblow, the final knock-out? The reader and listener are kept on edge. Is this the end?

But no, the seventh seal does not usher in the final judgment. As a matter of fact – nothing is happening. It seems like an anti-climax.

We read in Rev. 8:1 that *there was silence in heaven for about half an hour*. That is a remarkable pause in this fast-moving and noisy book. Again, one can find multiple explanations as to the meaning of this half an hour of silence, this dramatic pause in the march towards the end, which seems so close now. It is a matter of concentrating all the attention on what is coming.

Heaven is holding its breath. The united choirs fall silent. Filled with awe, everyone is waiting for what God is going to do.

During this suspenseful half hour John sees *the seven angels who stand before God*. The word “the” suggests that this is a particular group. In Luke 1:19 the archangel Gabriel says about himself that he “stands in the presence of God”. So, perhaps we are seeing an identifiable group of seven archangels. *They were given seven trumpets.*

So, somehow the opening of the seventh seal marks the beginning of another series of seven. There is more to come. Tension is mounting and it heightens our anticipation of what will be next. However, the angels do not sound their trumpets, at least not right away. Everything remains silent. Something is holding them up. But what is it?

Then John sees another angel come forward to stand at the altar in heaven. We have seen this altar before (Rev. 6:9). This angel has a *golden censer*. That is a small shovel to carry burning incense. This was also part of the temple worship in the Old Testament. Apparently this angel is going to offer a lot of incense. This is a symbol of Christ’s intercession, together *with the prayers of all the saints*.

In other words, the prayers of the church, of the martyrs, of the 144,000, of those being gathered to join the great multitude – and all this in one package – mixed with the ongoing intercession of Jesus Christ, reaches God on his holy throne.

And the silence continues. Everyone is watching. What is God going to do with it? Does he hear our prayers? When martyrs are tortured for their faith, they pray, but nothing seems to happen.<sup>4</sup> We can struggle with the apparent silence of God when we pray. And let us not even talk about the idea that our prayers could actually affect and influence the world in which we live and what is going on in this world.

And yet, despite all of this, God does hear. The prayers of his suffering and persecuted children will not go unheard or unanswered. How do you know?

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<sup>4</sup> In his 1966 novel *Silence* the Japanese author Shusako Endo confronts us masterfully with this theme.

Look what happens. As the silence becomes almost unbearable, the angel fills his censer with fire from the altar *and throws it on the earth*. God responds by sending his judgments on the earth. It is true, God's judgments are executed according to his own plan and instruction. But he gives the prayers of his believers an important role to play when it comes to triggering those judgments.

And then the silence breaks. With a sudden loud, ear-splitting noise. Here is God's response to the prayers of his church. *There came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake*. When you compare with the similar sound-and-light show in Rev. 4:5, you will notice that "an earthquake" is added to the terror. Something new is happening. As he responds to the praying voices of his children, the holy God is coming down in judgment, to destroy all evil, injustice, and wickedness.

Today the church that is sealed to survive must also be a praying church. Are we? Do we pray persistently for justice and righteousness? Do we pray unceasingly for the freedom and liberation of God's people? Do we pray for Jesus' return and the coming of God's kingdom?

there a connection, and if so, what kind of connection between this universal choir and how we worship God and sing to the praise of his glory?

3. The content of the scroll in Revelation 5 is an outline of God's judgment and salvation as these unfold in the last days, the time between Jesus' 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> coming. In the visions of the rest of the book Christ is opening the seals one by one, and every time new things are happening. Can we look at current events in the world today and determine at which one of the seals (or trumpets or bowls) we are right now? Why or why not?
4. Why can we say that Revelation 5 is the key to understanding the whole book?

### Chapter 12 – Revelation 6

1. What is the best way to explain the things we (and all people throughout the world) experience in light of what we read about the impact of the four horsemen and their activities in the verses 2 – 8? And what is the double purpose of those activities?
2. When the apostle John is given these visions he is *in the Spirit* and he can see and hear things he could not have seen and heard normally, with his physical eyes and ears. Does that mean that what he sees and hears is not real? Is there a difference – and if so, what would be the difference – between a dream and a vision?
3. People have different ideas as to what heaven looks like and how they imagine the souls of believers live on together with Christ in heaven. How does what we read in verses 10 and 11 help you to form an idea about this?
4. Verse 12 mentions a *great earthquake*. Where else in Scripture do you find references to great earthquakes as manifestation of God acting as Judge?

### Chapter 13 – Revelation 7:1 – 8:5

1. Read Ezekiel 9. What would be the connection between this chapter and what we read in Revelation 7 about *sealing the servants of God on their foreheads*?

2. The list of the twelve tribes of Israel in the verses 5 – 8 is different from the list(s) in the Old Testament (like in Genesis 49). Find the differences and explain what you think the reason might be for those differences.
3. If *the prayers of the saints* (meaning: the believers or the church) are going to have such a major impact on what is going to happen on earth, what do you think was the content of these prayers? What did the believers pray for?
4. When we pray – either personally, as family or as church – we pray that God may bless mission, evangelism, and that the Holy Spirit may open hearts and minds for the gospel of Jesus Christ. Do we also pray for justice and righteousness? For Jesus' return and the coming of God's kingdom? For the Last Judgment? What should we pray for?

#### Chapter 14 – Revelation 8:6-13

1. Can we recognize the disasters, triggered by the first four trumpets, in the time in which we live? How does God want us to respond to these disasters?
2. How does Revelation 8 help us to respond to people that say: 'If God is responsible for, or even involved in all the terrible things that are happening in the world, I cannot believe in a cruel God like that'....?
3. Read Romans 8:18-25. How can this passage help us to understand what is happening in Revelation 8:6-13?
4. The disasters following the trumpet-blasts in Revelation 8:6-13 are at least partly the results of *the prayers of the saints*, the church (Revelation 8:3-5). What does this teach us about what the church should be praying for?

#### Chapter 15 – Revelation 9

1. What does Revelation 9:6 mean? What is the only way out of the human misery?
2. In verse 13 we hear about *a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God*. In Revelation 6:9 this same altar was connected with the voices of the martyrs, and in 8:3,4 it is connected with the