

“A Way Out of No Way” (Revelation 7:1-17)

How many of you like to talk on the phone? Come on now. I bet a lot of you like to talk on the phone. My kids love to talk on the phone. Their favorite time to talk on the phone is when I’m talking on the phone. They will beg and plead to talk to the person that I am on the phone with. If I give in, they usually launch into some story without even identifying themselves. Now when I’m on the other end of the phone line, there are times when I can hardly tell who’s talking. Imagine what it must be like for Grandma and Grandpa or a friend. In mid-sentence they will tell their brother or sister to “be quiet” or “stop touching me” and the person on the other end is supposed to know when he or she is being addressed. When Jena, my two-year-old, gets on the phone, often she will just sit there nodding her head in response; the caller doesn’t even know if she is still there. The boys will say, “Look at this,” and hold something up to the phone for the caller to see. The conversation can seem rather erratic. It is not a well-scripted, orderly scene. It is sometimes utter chaos.

Many of you feel that the same could be said of the book of Revelation. Okay, I’ll be honest sometimes I do as well. Yet we must be reminded that Revelation is an important part of God’s Word and we are promised a blessing if we read and study it. If we understand that Revelation 6-19 is arranged like a phone conversation, it may make more sense to us. In chapter 6, John starts telling an orderly story. But in chapter 7, his chronological order is interrupted.¹ Chapter 7, then, serves as a pause (parenthesis) of relief amidst God’s great judgment.² In chapters 8-9, the order of events is resumed. Then John provides some more fill-in in chapters 10-15. In chapter 16, there is a return to the progressive order of events and finally, in chapters 17-19, there are more details. Sometimes the fill-in runs ahead of the story and at other times it backs up to add or emphasize pertinent information.³

Last week we studied how the tribulation will begin. We closed our time together with 6:17, which asks the penetrating question, “**for the great day of their wrath has come; and who is able to stand?**” Chapter 7 seeks to answer that question.

1. God always has an earthly remnant (7:1-8). Verse 1 begins with the phrase “**After this.**”⁴ Between the sixth and seventh seal John sees “**four angels standing at the four corners of the earth.**” In the book of Revelation, “**angels**” are the instruments God uses to temporarily suspend and execute judgment on the earth. The phrase “**the four corners of the earth**” is an idiom for four quadrants—North, South, East, and West (Isa 11:12). The Bible never taught a flat earth theory. The idiom in the English is the four points of the compass. “**The four corners of the earth**” speak of God’s sovereign global authority and all-encompassing activity. These four angels receive a command to “**hold back the four winds⁵ of the earth, so that no wind would blow on the earth or on the sea or on any tree.**” They are to do so until God’s bond-servants are sealed.

It is hard to fathom the impact that no winds would have on land, sea, and life. Wind is a necessary entity. The wind brings about rain. It carries pollen and removes pollution. Wind is used to power virtually all ships, and today it is being used experimentally to power generators. No wind would be a disaster. Before this disaster was to take effect, some were sealed.⁶

Here is a great biblical principle: Even in the midst of judgment and suffering, God is merciful. The tribulation will be both a time of horrific divine judgment (ch. 6) and terrific divine grace (ch. 7). While chapters 6, 8, and 9 all focus on divine judgment—God’s wrath poured out on men and the earth; chapter 7 reminds us that, in the midst of all this judgment, there is still mercy. Our God is full of mercy and compassion. He is slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness (Exod 34:6-7).

If you're like me, you've experienced this in your personal life. Even in the midst of trials and tests you can see God's grace, can't you? Even when you've once again fallen into sin, you know that God loves you and He is patient with you.

On Friday night, there was an awful accident on I-5 between Seattle and Tacoma. There was a pile-up that involved 40-50 cars. Some of these cars were crushed beyond recognition. Yet there were only minor injuries. God's merciful hand was present in the midst of human suffering. If only we were more conscious of God's merciful hand; it would cause us to know Him and praise Him more.

Next, in 7:2-3, another angel⁷ appears on the scene. This angel has greater authority than the other four angels and he possesses the seal of protection from the living God.⁸ This seal will preserve this chosen remnant throughout the tribulation period. Since the rapture has already occurred, God must raise up another new remnant. He does this by placing His seal on the foreheads of a group of bond-servants.

But exactly who are these **“bond-servants”**? Although there are a variety of interpretations,⁹ there is only one that fits the details of this passage and the whole of Scripture. The 144,000 witnesses are Jews from the 12¹⁰ tribes of Israel. Verses 4-8 makes this quite clear by repeating the fact that 12,000 come from each of the 12 tribes making a total of 144,000.¹¹ Biblical usage only permits the phrase **“sons of Israel”** to refer to ethnic Israelites. It can never be used to describe Gentiles. This is logical and fits with the entire scheme of biblical prophecy, with the fact this is the 70th week of Daniel and with the nature of the tribulation as a period designed to turn Israel to their Messiah (Dan 9:27; Jer 30:7).

These 144,000 Jewish believers are mentioned also in Revelation 9:4 and 14:1-5. In 14:4, they are referred to as **“first fruits to God and to the Lamb.”** I understand this expression to mean that these 144,000 believing Jews were but the first installment of that much larger group, who would, as a result of the tribulation, turn to God just as the Old Testament foretold (cf. Jer 30-31) and as Paul wrote in Romans 11:25-32.

When the 144,000 were sealed, it was to protect them from the harmful effects of the cessation of the winds.¹² This protection is spoken of more clearly in Revelation 9:4: “And they [the locusts] were told that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, nor any green thing, nor any tree, but only the men who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads.”

Just as the Israelites were exempt from the plagues that God sent on the Egyptians (cf. Exod 9:1-7, 22-26; 10:21-23), so the 144,000 were not to be harmed by the plagues that God was bringing upon the men of the earth (cf. Ps 91:7). Their preservation will be a testimony to God's power and grace. This is another reminder that God is able to preserve His children regardless of how bad things may appear. Not a hair on our head can be touched unless God sovereignly permits.

It has often been noted that John's list of the 12 tribes varies somewhat from the usual listing in the Old Testament. Specifically, Dan and Ephraim are omitted and Joseph has been added. Since John does not give us reasons for this arrangement, we cannot know for certain why the above arrangement is given. One interesting note is that a “normative” list of the tribes of Israel is not to be found in the Old Testament. In fact, there are over 20 different orders and lists of Israel's tribes. Only once is the same list repeated (Num 2:7; 10:14-29). Practically speaking, no one knows the identity of these tribes today, not even the nation of Israel. All of the genealogical records were destroyed by the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. God however, knows His people and their whereabouts. The most important element in these verses is the stress on the number twelve, which reflects the interest in the identification of this group with Old Testament Israel.

Although the direct interpretation of this passage deals with God's sovereign care for Israel, He cares for the church as well. One of the most neglected doctrines of the Bible is the doctrine of the providence of God. God processes everything that ever happens to a believer. Each one is under His seal. After someone placed arsenic in bottles of medicine, the government required all medicine to be sealed with protection stickers. Warning labels of "Do not partake if the seal is broken" caution of a broken seal. God placed His seal on us and no one can break it. The Holy Spirit seals the Christian (Eph 1:13; 4:30).¹³

One more issue to be tackled. Since all believers are gone when the tribulation begins, just how will the 144,000 be saved? (1) There will still be copies of the Scriptures, books, tracts, and material on the Internet containing the Gospel message. Undoubtedly, this will be found and used by the Holy Spirit. Some are even hiding copies of the Bible in caves. (2) Some Jews will have heard the Gospel from friends or on the radio or TV before the rapture. Then when the church suddenly disappears, the Holy Spirit will convince these select 144,000 that the Gospel message is indeed true. (3) Perhaps others will simply be perplexed over the disappearance of thousands of people through the rapture of the church. Some will seek answers and the Holy Spirit will lead them to Christ. Regardless of the methods God will use, these will come to trust in Jesus Christ as their Messiah-Savior.

Again, we are reminded that God always has an earthly remnant. In 1 Kings 19:18, Elijah thought he was alone but God had 7,000 that were still faithful to Him. You're not alone. You have a youth group or a small group. If I'm right and things deteriorate in our culture, you're going to need other believers. You won't make it alone. You'll be a spiritual casualty. It is possible to be an effective witness even in the midst of tribulation and trouble.

2. God always has a heavenly choir (7:9-17). In 7:9-10, John begins with the phrase "**after these things.**"¹⁴ This shows that this is a new vision and that John received it immediately after the vision of 7:1-8. Now John moves from the 144,000 on earth to "**a great multitude¹⁵ which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues.**" Since the horsemen of chapter 9 are numbered at 200 million, this innumerable host must have been some spectacle. This should encourage us to no end! It seems to indicate that more people will be saved during this terrible time than in any other period in history! From the standpoint of eternity, the tribulation will be a wonderful time. Man will not thwart God's salvation program! This is the great news of the power of the Gospel. Since there are still 3.8 billion people who do not have a real Gospel witness, we cannot be sure how this massive outpouring of souls will come about. It is possible that the 144,000 are used by God to help bring this great multitude to faith in Christ. God will also use His two witnesses (Rev 11:3) and an angel (Rev 14:6) to spread the Gospel throughout the world during the tribulation period. However it occurs, it will require divine intervention.

John describes this great multitude as standing in heaven before the throne and in front of the Lamb (cf. Rev 5:13). Standing before the throne of God and before the Lamb is a position of great honor. They are wearing white robes. The only other people who wear "white robes" are the tribulation martyrs seen under the altar in Revelation 6:11. This would seem to suggest that they are part of the same group. These white robes indicate purity. This great multitude also has "palm branches" in their hands indicating victory. In Scripture, palm branches are associated with celebration, deliverance, and joy (cf. Lev 23:40; Neh 8:15-17; John 12:13). They were the ancient equivalent of balloons at a party.

These saints cry out with a loud voice saying, "**Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.**" They are excited about the truth that salvation belongs to our God and His Lamb and absolutely no one else (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). They recognize that *God* is the source of salvation, and no

one else. Salvation isn't something we achieve; it is something we receive. Salvation is a gift of God (Eph 2:8-9).

In 7:11-12, John records, **“And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders¹⁶ and the four living creatures; and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,¹² saying, ‘Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen.’”** Angels are always seen in attendance to God, obeying His will, or in the worship of God's person and work as in creation (Job 38:1-7), or as in man's salvation (Luke 2:13-14; 15:8-10). These angels say, “Amen!” which means “So be it! We agree!” To what do these angels say “Amen?” A list of seven attributes of God to be praised. The angels ascribe to God blessing, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honor, power, and strength” (cf. Rev 5:12). This ascription will continue forever and ever. Ultimately, every created thing praises God or will eventually praise God. That is our ultimate purpose. Like the angels, our major role in heaven is acknowledging the glory of God. Are you getting in tune for an eternity of praise to God? Your marching orders on earth are to worship the Lord—to know Him intimately and passionately. This will be your main role throughout eternity.

In 7:13, one of the elders asked John a leading question: **“These who are clothed in the white robes, who are they, and where have they come from?”** The words **“and one of the elders answered, saying to me,”** (cf. Rev 5:5) suggests that John had some questions regarding the identity of this great multitude. It's no wonder; Jesus had taught John and the other disciples that few would be chosen (Matt 7:13-14; 22:14). He must have been overwhelmed by this innumerable mass of people. Not to mention, for the first time in his life, seeing people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation must have blown him away.¹⁷

John politely deferred and replied, **“My lord, you know.”**¹⁸ The elder then informed John that this great multitude is made up of **“the ones who come¹⁹ out of the great Tribulation.”** These tribulation saints are said to **“have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”** (7:14; cf. 1:5; 5:9). It reminds us that salvation is the same in the tribulation as it is today. It is given as a gift to all those who simply trust in the blood of the Lamb (7:14-15a). **“For this reason,”** and this reason only, these saints are in heaven before the throne.

This chapter concludes in 7:15-17 with ten eternal blessings enjoyed by this redeemed multitude.

1. They are before the throne of God.
2. They serve Him day and night in His temple. What does this multitude do before the throne? John is told that they **“serve Him day and night in His temple”** (7:15b). This is a reference to a future worship extravaganza because the tribulation has only begun in chapter 6, so chapter 7 has in view future events. As we mentioned earlier, chapter 7 serves as a parenthesis between the events of chapters 6 and 8. **“Night and day”** reinforces the concept of constant service. The expression is an idiom meaning unceasingly or without pause. Revelation 22:3-5 informs us that there is no day or night in heaven. There will be no need for rest or sleep in God's heaven, for they will never get tired or need relief from their worship. Just like these tribulation saints, we too will worship our great God and His Lamb forever and ever.
3. God will spread His tent over them. John also writes, **“He who sits on the throne shall spread His tabernacle²⁰ over them.”** Not only will they have this wonderful intimacy, but they will be free from all the devastation of the tribulation.
4. Never again will they hunger.

5. Never again will they thirst.
6. The sun will not beat upon them.
7. Nor any scorching heat. This is in stark contrast to what happened to them on earth. They had been hungry, for they couldn't buy food without the mark of the Beast; they were thirsty, for the rivers were turned to blood; they were scorched with the burning sun. But now the agony of their lives will be over.²¹
8. The Lamb will be their shepherd.²² In another striking paradox, the saints are described as clothed in robes made white in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 7:14). "The Lamb... will be their shepherd" (7:17) is yet another paradoxical figure—the Lamb leads the flock. This verse (and many others throughout the Scripture) points to the preeminence of Jesus Christ. The Father has given the Son all rule and authority and He is the reason why we will one day spend eternity with our Father and His Lamb. The phrase "**springs of the water of life**" is literally "life's water springs." The Greek language often reverses the order of words and phrases for the purpose of emphasis. By placing the word "**life**" at the front of this phrase, John is stressing the reality of life forevermore. Water symbolizes eternal life (Isa 55:1; John 7:38-39). Jesus even closes this book by offering those who are thirsty to drink freely from the spring of the Water of Life (21:6; 22:17). For those who die in the midst of the great tribulation you can imagine the comfort of these words. Upon our arrival in heaven, the great Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, will allow us to drink of life's water springs for all eternity.
9. He will lead them to springs of living water.
10. God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.²³ What a glorious place heaven will be, especially for those tribulation believers who have known true hell on earth (see Isa 25:8; Jer 31:16).

To summarize, the first three of these blessings mean that the redeemed will be in the direct presence of God. The next four describe an end to the negative effects of sin. The final three blessings focus on the eternal joys of the redeemed.

How often we pray for one who is critically ill, that God will somehow take away the pain and prevent death. In the light of Revelation chapter 7 this may be a very shortsighted (and faithless) prayer. If suffering and death is indeed a means of entrance into God's heaven for those who trust in Him, why do we so eagerly pray against it taking place?

There are countless religions available to men today, but the one thing men look for is a belief that endures when "the bottom falls out." The faithful endurance of the saints in the midst of great tribulation is one of the most powerful testimonies that we can give to an unsaved world. God calls us to live the life before our world.

Many people assume that they can trust Christ later in life. If they miss the rapture, they will believe immediately after the tribulation starts. Yet this is a frightening prospect. Not only will the tribulation period be hell on earth, but many who are living during this period will fall under the spell of Satan's lies (2 Thess 2:9-12). The time to be saved is today not tomorrow. If a person refuses to be saved today, what guarantee does he have that he will be willing to be saved in the future?

If a person refuses to trust Christ today when it is easy (for many, little or no persecution), why should this person be willing to trust Christ tomorrow when it will be very difficult (great persecution for believers during the tribulation)? Those who reject the Gospel today are in danger of rejecting the Gospel tomorrow. The person who rejects the Gospel before the rapture could very well be one of those who will worship the Man of Sin during the tribulation. Those who are unbelievers today will probably be unbelievers tomorrow. Please, I urge you, believe in Christ today. Don't delay.

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Notes

¹ Revelation 6 closes with the sixth seal and the seventh is not opened until Revelation 8:1. Rev 10:1-11:13 produces a similar break between the sixth and seventh trumpets.

² It is important to observe how the events of the tribulation are organized. First, we must recognize that the judgments form the backbone of chapter 6-19 and that the judgments follow in chronological order: The seven seals (6:1-8:6); the seven trumpets (8:7-9:21); and the seven bowls (15:1-16:21). Second, we must note that the other chapters and sections of Revelation 6-19 inform us of key players and events during this time of unprecedented distress. They reveal vital information about the tribulation period but are not arranged in chronological order.

³ Charles Ryrie, *Revelation: EBC* (Chicago: Moody, 1968), 44.

⁴ The phrase “after this” or “after these things” is used throughout Revelation with the phrase, “I saw” (*eidon*) to signify a new vision (cf. 4:1, 7:1, 7:9, 15:5, 18:1, 19:1). John is receiving a new vision at this time, which falls between the sixth seal judgment of 6:12-17 and the seventh seal revealed in 8:1.

⁵ “The four winds” relate the temporary restraint of God’s judgments that follow to the entire earth. Incidentally, wind is often used in Scripture as a symbol of divine judgment (2 Sam 22:11; Jer 49:36; 51:1). This fits nicely with the restraint motif of this chapter.

⁶ I’m indebted to my friend Bob Deffinbaugh for this insight.

⁷ “Another angel” (Rev 7:2) is variously interpreted as a messenger of God or even Christ Himself, because he commands the four angels and has the seal of God (representing God’s authority) and speaks in the plural as though speaking for God.

⁸ This takes the reader back to Ezekiel 9 when seven angels including one angel who acts as a scribe go through Jerusalem and mark everyone who mourns over the sin of Jerusalem. In other words this angel marks the righteous for protection for the duration of the tribulation to come.

⁹ Some Christian interpreters have identified the 144,000 as symbolic of “spiritual Israel” (i.e., the church); Jehovah Witnesses’ have claimed that they are witnesses; Mormon’s have understood them as Mormon elders; and Seventh-Day Adventists believe it is a reference to their members who are observing the Sabbath when Christ returns.

¹⁰ Look up the number “twelve” in a concordance. Ishmael became the father of 12 princes. Jacob became the father of 12 sons, from which came twelve tribes, (though Levi wasn’t in that number and Joseph’s two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, counted for two of the tribes). The number 12 seems to say that they are all here and accounted for. Jesus chooses 12 apostles and when Judas defects, another apostle must be chosen to replace him to bring the number to 12 again before the Holy Spirit comes (see Acts 1).

¹¹ This view is further substantiated by noting the distinction that John makes between the 144,000 and the great multitude that follows (Rev 7:9-14).

¹² It is typically thought that the sealing of the 144,000 protected them from martyrdom. While this may be true, it is not specifically stated. Neither, I must add, are we told precisely what the 144,000 are sealed for. It is generally assumed that these sealed Jewish saints are protected from martyrdom so that they may evangelize. They are thus thought by some to be the instruments of God for the salvation of the innumerable host. While this is possible, it is not stated. I am personally more inclined to see the emphasis fall on the stated fact (14:4) that they are first fruits to God, a guarantee of the salvation of the entire nation Israel.

¹³ Dr. Grant C. Richison, *Revelation* (Grace Notes) 83.

¹⁴ Nearly all Bible scholars agree that the expression “after these things” is intended to inform us that John saw this vision after the one described in chapter 6. I should make clear that this does not necessarily suggest that the events described in the vision occur after those of the previous vision. The order in which John saw the visions is not necessarily the order of the events described by the visions. Remember that this seventh chapter is parenthetical in the drama of the seven seals. Chronology or sequence is thus not necessarily implied by this expression.

¹⁵ Some have suggested that the 144,000 and the great multitude are the same people (i.e., the church). However, this is unlikely for at least three reasons. First, it is “after these things,” which introduces a new vision. Second, this group is described as “a great multitude” that no one could count, no specific number. Third, the 144,000 came from the twelve tribes of Israel where this group comes from every nation, tribe, people and language. This group depicts the mass of humanity, crossing all barriers and dividing lines. They are not just Jewish but a mixture of Jews and Gentiles and from every people group across the world.

¹⁶ By the way, the statement that “all angels” give praise along with the “elders” clearly determines that the twenty-four elders are not angels.

¹⁷ See also Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 495.

¹⁸ Numerous scholars assert that the force of John's language in his reply reveals that he was ignorant of the great multitude's identity. If the great multitude were the church, it seems strange that John did not recognize it (at least those who belonged to the church in his time), in light of the fact that he was one of the church's apostles and part of its foundation (Eph 2:20).

¹⁹ The word translated "come" (*erchomenoi*) is a present tense participle giving the sense of continuous action. These tribulation saints will enter heaven throughout the tribulation judgments.

²⁰ The phrase "spread His tabernacle" is one Greek verb (*skhnō*). This verb means "to live, dwell, have one's tent, encamp." It was used of setting up or spreading a tent over something. The verb comes from the noun *sknh* (a tent, booth, tabernacle) and was used of the Mosaic tabernacle, of its heavenly prototype, and of the dwelling of God in the New Jerusalem that comes down from heaven. Interestingly, John only uses the verb *skhnō* in one other place (John 1:14) and there it refers to God's presence among men. The preposition "over" reveals that these saints will have access to God's perfect provision, protection, and fellowship in an unlimited way!

²¹ David Jeremiah, *Escape the Coming Night* (Dallas: Word, 1997 [1990]), 138.

²² See Ezek 34:23; John 10:11, 14; 21:16; 1 Pet 2:22, 25; 5:1-4.

²³ All of these figures are drawn from the Old Testament (see Isa 25:8; 49:10; Jer 2:13; Ezek 34:23) and are repeated again in Rev 21:3-4.