

REVELATION CHAPTER SEVEN

If I were a doctor I would diagnose that the Book of Revelation is suffering from a dose of chronic misinterpretation. Now I am not saying that I have the definitive interpretation, all the answers, but I do promise to try to avoid some of the more outlandish claims that have been made about this book, and what it means.

Having said that I can see how easy it is to fall into error. Secular society treats the bible as just another book, and one that is unreliable historically. We Christians believe that the whole of the bible is inspired by God, & reacting against society we can make the error of insisting that the bible is historically accurate in all 66 books.

However not all the books of the bible are supposed to be taken literally. We have books of poetry in the Old Testament, and in the Book of Revelation we have a book of apocalyptic literature that is clearly symbolic, and not designed to give timetables of events or to have its characters taken as literal beings.

So as Andrew Carter told us last week the four horsemen of the apocalypse were not real men and their steeds not real horses. They symbolised something, and that was the sin of mankind throughout the centuries.

Trying to make literal people, or creatures out of symbolism leads to the type of error that the Jehovah's Witnesses have made with the 144,000 that we read about in today's passage, but more about that in a moment.

Today's passage is a problem for those who are looking for a timeline to follow so that they can work out the events of the future. Last week's chapter appears to end in our future at the time when God calls 'time' on the world as we know it. Basically the sky begins to fall down, not literally, but symbolically, and the reaction of unbelievers is to run and hide from 'the face of Him that sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb.'

Faced with the destruction of the world, and the imminent day of judgement chapter six finishes with a question 'For the great day of their (that is He on the throne, & the lambs) wrath has come, and who can stand?'

That is the question that is asked and the answer is given in this evening's passage.

Now I am sure that last week's passage will have raised at least one question. Why did chapter six only deal with six seals when verse one of chapter six says clearly states that there were seven seals. Well you will have to wait until next week to look at the seventh seal.

This evening's passage is an interlude between the sixth & seventh seals where the Lord gives an answer to that very important question – who can stand at the day of judgement?

The implication is that the day of judgement is a very dangerous time. Un-believers will try to run & hide, but they will fail to escape from God's final wrath on sinful mankind. This day seems to be so dangerous that even the redeemed; Christians seem to be in danger.

Some people get around this by claiming that the church has already been raptured & it is this group whom we see as the 144,000 in this evening's passage, & they are safe. In case any of you are unsure the rapture is the term given to the time when Jesus returns & takes all the believers alive at that time to be with Him in heaven.

If this is the case then this passage had nothing to say to the suffering persecuted church of John's day

However there is no mention anywhere in the Book of Revelation of the church vacating earth for a safe haven in heaven. Indeed Revelation chapter 21 tells us of the New Jerusalem (our home for eternity) coming out of heaven to what could only be the new earth. Anyway this would miss the point of John's answer to the question of 'who can stand?'

Remember that he was writing to a church that was being persecuted, and in some cases quite horribly. John was intending to show them that despite their failings, despite their sins, despite their persecution that the church in Christ is secure. He was not promising them an escape from persecution, but to know God's security in the midst of their suffering.

Now the readers of John's book would have been aghast at the opening of the sixth seal. The events there portrayed would have probably led them to give up rather than push on through their trials. Faced with opposition from the Romans and the Jews they probably felt ill equipped to carry on as they were, let alone if such events as portrayed in chapter 6 v 12-16 were to occur in their lifetimes.

So John is given a vision. This vision is to show the persecuted believers that they are safe in Christ even if they lose their lives.

Now please do not let yourselves be put off by the wording of verse 1 of chapter seven. The four corners of the earth do not mean that God, John or most people alive in John's day believed in a flat earth. Recent research has shown that the vast majority of educated people from the 3rd century BC onwards believed that the earth was a sphere.

The four corners of the earth are symbolic. Four is often used to symbolise creation so a rectangle with four corners is actually a good way for them to symbolically picture the earth. What they meant was the whole of creation.

Now it may seem odd to have an angel call out not to harm the land, and the sea or the trees when the sun had gone black in the previous chapter, and the sky had metaphorically fallen in. This shows the danger in assuming that each chapter follows the previous one in time. Clearly the events in chapter seven precede those in at least verses 12-17 of chapter six.

What exactly the angels are being held back from doing I am not sure. It certainly has to do with God's judgement & could be the end of times. What we are supposed to get from this passage is that a) God is in control of what is to happen & b) He will not let ultimate harm come to those who are sealed.

What is meant by sealed? Well we have already seen that a scroll would have a seal put on it by the owner. This would normally be in wax & would carry the mark of the owner. Therefore these 144,000 carry the mark of God. Again this is not a physical mark or seal, but a symbolic one that shows that the 144,000 belong to God.

Who were these 144,000?

Well in verse 4 John writes

'Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.'

Then John goes on to list how many of each was from each tribe. Here we have an interesting problem which only goes to show that you cannot take numbers in Revelation as literal figures or indeed the characters themselves.

On the face of it 12,000 from each tribe seems fair. However the tribe of Dan is missed out completely from the list in verses 5-8 & instead Manasseh, the son of Joseph put in his place. Is this supposed to mirror how Judas was part of the original twelve Apostles, but then fell away & was replaced? Is this passage saying that there is a tie between these tribes & the apostles in the New Testament?

What else so we know about these 144,000? Well chapter 14 v 4 describes them as

'Those who did not defile themselves with women.'

Therefore if you are a literalist then the 144,000 are literally 144,000 male Jewish virgins.

Well clearly this is not what is meant here as we can see by reading this evenings passage. In fact as we shall see this group do not total 144,000, & are not necessarily Jewish or male or virgins.

I do apologise to whoever is responsible for taking chapter 14, but I have to mention this chapter again. Who are the 144,000 is the question & chapter 14 v 3 tells us that they are the 'redeemed of the earth.' In other words they are Christians. Christians are pure

according to this passage, but we know that this is not because we are good people, but because our defiling has been forgiven because Jesus took our punishment on the cross.

But if this 144,000 are Christians then why are they likened to the tribes of Israel? Well first of all we must not get confused by exactly who is meant by Israel here. It is not the small country to the east of the Mediterranean Sea.

Romans 11 v 25-26a

'I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved.'

The inference here is that Gentiles, that is us non Jews, have become part of Israel. But clearly that does not mean that we have become Jews, there is a difference. The New Testament is clear that Salvation is through the Lord Jesus Christ alone. Any who reject Christ are not saved even if they were born a Jew.

Again the New Testament is clear that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, the promised Saviour that the Jews had been waiting for. Christianity is not a separate religion, but the fulfilment of the Jewish faith. Judaeo-Christianity is a better title for our faith. If therefore Jesus is the Jewish Messiah then it makes sense for all followers of Christ should be considered part of Israel.

If Christ is the fulfilment of the Jewish faith then all those who reject Christ cannot then truthfully be called part of Israel. Because of their rejection of Christ the Jews have therefore forfeited their right to be part of the spiritual Israel.

In conclusion God is not worried about geographical countries, and maps on paper. His idea of Israel is the group of people who follow Him. This idea is reinforced by verse 9 where after John hears about the 144,000 he then sees the following-

'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.'

So here you have it. The new Israel, the true Israel, is the redeemed of the earth. All the believers from all time, whether Jew or non Jew, are here. It is they who are the 144,000, and if you are a believer in Christ, if you are a Christian then you are there.

God is telling the persecuted church of John's day, and the persecuted church of today that whatever the world may throw at them, that they are safe in Christ. Who can stand at the time of the day of judgement? Christians can. We are safe thanks to Christ.

Now some of you may be wondering why the number 144,000 is used to denote believers in this passage? Why not 10, 100 or 1000? Well this is a matter of speculation as we are not

told directly. However the number symbolism that dots the Book of Revelation does give us a clue.

In chapter four verse 8 we read

‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty.’

Here the four living creatures want to emphasise the holiness of God, and they do it by singing it three times. Therefore the number three can be said to symbolise emphasis.

The number ten is used in Revelation & in the rest of the bible to be an order of magnitude. There are always 40 days or 40 weeks or 40 years (4x10) & they are not literal numbers, but they denote the passage of a period of time. So you can say that ten is an order of magnitude similar to how we might use the word dozen.

Therefore if you wanted to emphasise the completeness or wholeness of a number you would use the number that refers to an order of magnitude – 10 and emphasise that by multiplying it by itself three times In other words multiply it by 1000. I hope you are following this.

Now what number denotes the church? Well many people think it has to be the number twelve as there were 12 tribes of Israel & twelve Apostles. If that is the case then one way of symbolising the complete number of all the church throughout time would be to multiply 12 by itself & then emphasise it. In other words $12 \times 12 \times 1000 = 144,000$.

Now I cannot be certain that this is the correct interpretation of the 144,000, but it does work & until someone can offer me a better explanation for this number then I will go with it.

So if my interpretation is correct then the 144,000 is the whole church, every believer that there ever was, is now, and will be in the future. As there are many million believers alive today then this number is purely symbolic.

The billions of believers that will be with Christ for eternity must have made an awesome sight. The words of verse 9 give a clue to how John must have felt as he looked at them. A great multitude that no-one could count is what he said & they must have looked like grains of sand on a beach.

This passage gives us a clue to what life will be like when we go to be with Christ. We will not be surrounded just by white middle class people, but with people from all walks of life, all colours, all cultures, and speaking different languages. It will be my sort of multi cultural society as whatever the race, whatever the colour, and whatever the culture we will all have something in common & that is Christ.

Well let us remember that this vision is just a vision. It is highly likely that not all believers have been born yet, but they are included in that great multitude. Therefore what we see

these people doing is as symbolic as the number that represents them. What they are doing is found in verse 9b

‘They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.’

Like the robes given to the martyrs under the altar the robes of the great multitude are white. This does not mean that our clothes will be of a uniform colour, but that the wearers are now classed as pure and righteous, because their sins have been forgiven & they have been made perfect by God.

Palm branches symbolise triumph just as they did at the triumphal entry of Christ into Jerusalem. These are the overcomers that Christ mentioned in several of the letters to the churches at the beginning of the book. They have overcome the odds that were stacked against them. They have come through the persecution & the death threats. They are the ones who had their churches burnt down, or who had to flee for their lives because of the crime of becoming Christians. They are us.

Let us remember that for most of the history of the church persecution has been the lot of the Christian. We live in a short period of time in a country that did once profess Christian belief. That has now gone & with it has gone the protection of a Christian nation. Thank God we are still safe in Christ.

The great multitude cried out with a loud voice in verse 10

‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the lamb.’

Because they have overcome, because they have witnessed first hand the saving grace of our God their praise is now of triumph, of certainty. They have come through & are about to reap the benefits of eternal life with Christ. Whilst the world fell apart at the end of times, and men ran and hid these could stand in the fierce heat of God’s judgement.

But none of this vast multitude of believers thought that their salvation had anything to do with them. None of them thought that they had made it because they had earned their way to God. Neither did any of them believe it was because of what they did not do that earned them the right to be there, that they had lived good lives & avoided bad influences. They all realised that they owed everything to God. Others might have helped them on the way, but their final Salvation was totally due to the work of Christ. ‘Salvation belongs to our God’ they cried, and there were no detractors.

Faced with that awesome cry from the 144,000 the angels, elders, and the four living creatures could do nothing but fall down in praise of the God who had saved them.

Then in verse 13 one of the elders asks John

‘These in white robes – who are they, and where did they come from?’

It was almost a rhetorical question and John knew that the man already had the answer.

‘Sir, you know’ he says

‘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.’

What is this great tribulation? Well the word tribulation means misery; distress & suffering & the readers of this book will have automatically thought that it referred to their day. There are also those who think that at the end times Satan will be freed from bondage & allowed to attack the church with greater ferocity for a relatively short while, but in truth the lot of the church has always been persecution & suffering somewhere in the world.

And if the 144,000 refers to the whole church then the great tribulation which refers to the 144,000 has to refer to the time of the whole church & not just the time of the original readers of this book or some time in our future. Indeed we live during the time of the great tribulation. If we are believers then we are those who have washed our robes & made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

Verses 15-17 give us a general clue about life with Christ at this time. However we must remember that we are still in the realm of symbolism.

‘Therefore they are before the throne of God and serve Him day and night in His temple.’

A literalist would read this and think that eternal life was in reality an eternal church service. I do not believe that this is the case at all.

Revelation chapter 21 shows us that God comes to live with us. Heaven comes down to a New Jerusalem where believers will live. Even this is symbolic though. Jerusalem is a symbol of where we live. God will be with us wherever we are. We will be forever before the throne of God, & in His temple because God will be living with us. And we will be living on a new earth, but one that can house the billions of believers that call on the name of our Lord.

And what will we be doing? We will be serving the Lord. As Christians we want to serve our Lord, & we pray for guidance & seek to do His will. When we are in eternity then our whole life will be God serving. Today we spend a lot of our time doing what we want, going our way, but when we are made perfect then we will want to do Gods will all the time.

Now I don’t know just how far you can go with symbolic narrative. Does serving God day & night mean that we will not need sleep, that our bodies will not get tired? Does this mean that we will not have time to enjoy the beauty of our new homes & spend time with our friends there? I don’t think so. I think serving God day & night means that serving God will be our goal. I do not think that serving God day & night means that we will never stop working, that is different.

Clearly our time with Christ will be a time of peace.

Verse 15b-17

And He who sits on the throne will spread His tent over them.

Never again will they hunger,

never again will they thirst.

The sun will not beat down upon them,

nor any scorching heat.

For the Lamb at the centre 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.'

Now this sounds like heaven to us in the early years of the 21st century in the UK. I wonder what it felt like to the original readers of this book. Those who had seen their family & friends be killed for their faith, even dipped in wax alive & set alight.

Life with Christ will not be the life of a slave as we normally think of slaves. Serving God will be the easiest of yokes. Christ will not be an autocratic ruler, but be like a Shepherd guiding His flock to the best pasture. There will be no persecution then, there will be no pain, no suffering, and every tear of sorrow or pain will be wiped away.

So there you have it. The Book of Revelation is not all doom & gloom. It is not all about judgement & disasters. It is also about who will come through all that will happen between now & when Christ returns. And that someone is you if you have accepted the Lord Jesus as your Saviour and Lord.

Let us close our service now by singing

ORDER OF SERVICE – EVENING SERVICE 24TH AUG 2008

1) Opening song number 473 'my hope is built on nothing less'

2) Opening prayer

Loving Father

We would now ask that You bless this service. Be with all who take part & that Lord includes all of us. We pray that You will find our praise & worship acceptable in Your eyes & that You will speak to us through all that goes on – amen.

3) Introduce TC Times

4) Offering & prayer

Loving Father

We pray that You will take all the work that has been done for You, all the money that we have given back to You & use them to extend Your Kingdom here on earth – amen.

5) Song Time

a) 117 'Do not be worried & upset'

b) 305 'I will build my church'

c) 423 'Living under the shadow of His wing'

6) Prayer Time

Loving Father

Once again we thank You for this small chapel that we can meet together in. We thank You for those who kept it open over the years, and for the witness that it has been. We thank You for the freedom of worship that we have in this country & we continue to pray that this will remain.

We pray that for the leaders of our nation. We thank You that the Queen is a good witness for You, and ask that those who look up to her will listen to her talk about her faith.

We pray also for our political leaders that they will see the value of laws based upon Your word, and not ignore our God from the statutes and laws of our nation.

We would pray for this chapel, and ask that You will be with us in the person of the Holy Spirit. We ask that You be with the Elders as we look ahead & make decisions as to what we do here, and the direction we must go in. We pray that You be with our deacons as they seek to serve You, and also with all others that lead in any way.

We pray for the children's work & thank You that the leaders are having a well deserved rest over the school holidays. We pray that You will refresh them for the work ahead & inspire them as they seek Your will.

We pray for Andrew & Ashlea Proudfoot as they have their time of sabbatical & again ask that they come back to us rested, and refreshed for what You have for us in the year ahead.

We pray for any of our number who are sick & ask for healing. We pray for any who are depressed that You will lift them up. We thank You that our walk with You is never alone & that You will carry us if necessary.

And Lord we would pray for this service. We thank You for the music & the songs we have sung. Now we ask that You open our ears and our minds to what You have to say to us from the Book of Revelation. Challenge us, or build us up we ask, and in the name of Your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ – amen.

7) Song number 59 'Blessed assurance'

8) Reading & address – Revelation chapter 7

9) Closing song number 32 'An army of ordinary people'

10) Closing prayer

Loving Father

We thank You for the security we have in Christ. We thank You that the world will never win. The war is already won, but we know that there are a good few battles ahead, and we ask that this passage will reassure us as we seek to live for You – amen