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Revelation 7

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# WHO CAN STAND?

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Last week we saw that the sixth seal unleashes the great and terrible day of the Lord, the day of wrath when he turns his face upon a world that has turned its back on him. The recipients of his wrath cry out to be hidden from his face, asking, “Who can stand?” (6:17) It seems like a rhetorical question, to which the obvious answer is “no one.” The ones asking this question include “the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty” (6:15). When the real sovereign of the universe shows up they realize how small and weak they really are. If they can’t stand when God shows up, then who possibly can? The end has obviously come, no one can stand, and we expect the seventh seal which wraps it all up.

But that’s not what we get. John’s next vision is not of the seventh seal being opened; that doesn’t happen until 8:1. Instead, he is given a vision which addresses the question, “Who can stand?” We weren’t expecting an answer, thinking the question to be rhetorical. But there is an answer, and a vital one it is. Because chapter 7 addresses the question raised in 6:17, in some respects it is still part of the sixth seal. But in other respects it forms an interlude between the sixth and seventh seals, an interlude during which John is shown people and events in a different realm.

The title of this series on Revelation is “The Seen and the Unseen.” The visions of the book move between the seen world on earth and the unseen world in heaven. One of the purposes of the book is to open the readers’ eyes to these unseen realities of heaven. In a song by Stuart Townend that we’ve been singing lately (*O My Soul, Arise and Bless Your Maker*), we beseech God, “Fill my gaze with things as yet unseen.” No book does this better than Revelation. Yet too many popular books about Revelation are devoted to filling our gaze with things as yet unseen on earth, devoted to figuring out timetables of visible events in the “seen world.” What we really need is to gaze on things as yet unseen in heaven, to gaze on the hidden realities in the unseen world. This is what Revelation 7 gives us.

“Who can stand?” It is in the “seen world” that the question is asked, but in the “unseen world” that it is answered. That’s why the only answer available to the rich and powerful is “no one.” They see only the “seen world” That’s why we need this interlude: to fill our gaze with things as yet unseen.

John’s vision is two-fold: note the repetition, “After this I saw” (7:1), “After this I looked” (7:9)—the verb is actually the same, though NIV translates it differently. What he sees concerns two groups of people: 144,000 from all Israel, and an innumerable multitude from all nations. As we shall see, there is much disagreement over the identification of these two groups.

## A. The 144,000 (7:1-8)

**After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of**

**the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: “Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.” (Rev 7:1-3 NIV)**

Though we are still in the series of seven seals, we are already being prepared for the seven trumpets. The four angels whom John sees restraining the four winds from blowing on the land, the sea and the trees are presumably the four angels who blow the first four trumpets, which unleash terrifying destruction upon the land, the sea and the trees. In the Old Testament, the four winds are a metaphor for the four corners of the earth. In Zech 6:5 they are also identified as the four chariots which are pulled by the colored horses. These horses and the horses of Zechariah 1 are the image bank from which are drawn the four horsemen of the first four seals. Zechariah’s horses went out from God’s presence to patrol the earth. The four horsemen of the Apocalypse go out to bring judgment upon the four corners of the earth, judgment which is given them from the one seated upon the throne. The trumpets also bring God’s judgments but with the intensity turned up. But there is a pause. The winds cannot yet be released; the trumpets cannot yet be blown. Something of vital importance has to happen first.

John sees another angel approaching from the east, the direction of life. He carries the seal of the living God, and explains to the four angels that the reason they are restraining the four winds of judgment is so that God’s servants might first be sealed on their foreheads with the seal of God. The seal represents ownership: these are God’s people. It also represents protection: once they are sealed they cannot be harmed.

Who can stand? These angels can stand. They stand so that God’s servants might be sealed in protection against the devastating judgment on the day of God’s wrath.

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

**From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed,  
from the tribe of Reuben 12,000,  
from the tribe of Gad 12,000,  
from the tribe of Asher 12,000,  
from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000,  
from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000,  
from the tribe of Simeon 12,000,  
from the tribe of Levi 12,000,  
from the tribe of Issachar 12,000,  
from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000,  
from the tribe of Joseph 12,000,  
from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000. (7:4-8)**

How many people are sealed? John hears that there are 144,000 drawn from all the tribes of Israel. There follows an enumeration: 12,000 from each of twelve tribes. Notice the pre-eminence of Judah,

Jacob's fourth-born son; he is listed first because from his tribe came the victorious Lion who is a slain Lamb.

Who are these 144,000? The Jehovah's Witnesses believe that this is the actual number of JW's. But there have now been more than 144,000, more than 288,000. So they now believe there are multiple sets of 144,000 with each successive set being less special. That's chronological discrimination!

Dispensationalists believe that the Rapture occurred at 4:1, removing the Church from the earth. The events from 6:1 on unfold during the Great Tribulation, affecting those who are "left behind." These 144,000 are the exact number of Jews who are converted during the Tribulation. One problem with taking this list literally is that the list does not actually include all the tribes of Israel. Dan is missing, presumably because in the Old Testament Dan was responsible for so much idolatry (e.g. Judges 18). Joseph is present but so is one of his sons, Manasseh. Jacob did indeed have twelve sons, but after Jacob went down to Egypt, Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh were reckoned as Jacob's. They became full tribes in Israel in place of Joseph. That makes thirteen. The list was reduced to twelve because Levi was counted separately. Called to special service to God, Levi received no inheritance in the land, for the Lord himself was Levi's inheritance. Yet Levi is present in this list. It seems, therefore, that this list is not literally "all Israel."

A third view is that these 144,000 are God's people throughout time. They are not just Jews, and they are not just during the Great Tribulation. 144,000 is a symbolic number representing the entire people of God, but using Israel language. Even the Old Testament applies the language of Israel to Gentiles. For example, the text we have on our bulletin cover,

**Glorious things are said of you,**

**O city of God:**

**"I will record Rahab and Babylon**

**among those who acknowledge me—**

**Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush—**

**and will say, "This one was born in Zion."**

**Indeed, of Zion it will be said,**

**"This one and that one were born in her,**

**and the Most High himself will establish her."**

**The LORD will write in the register of the peoples:**

**"This one was born in Zion." (Ps 87:3-6)**

Egypt (Rahab), Babylon, Philistia: these are all Israel's enemies. They are obviously Gentiles, and just as obviously, they were not born in Zion. Yet the Lord will record in the register, "This one was born in Zion." These Gentiles belong to the people of God. This is an extraordinary psalm: not only will God save the "good Gentiles"; he will extend his salvation even to Israel's enemies, recording them all in the register of Zion.

If we take these 144,000 as representing all God's people, all God's servants, what sense do we make of the number? It is a compound of two further numbers: 12-squared and 10-cubed. Certain Biblical numbers have well-established meanings: 12 represents God's people; 10 is the complete number, and 10-cubed represents a very large complete number. The compound number thus represents the very large totality of God's people. It is not a limiting number, as the Jehovah's Witnesses take it, but an expansive number. How many are sealed? All God's people, and it's a lot of people. Furthermore, they're enumerated: God's knows them all. They're all there. No one is missing.

## **B. The Innumerable Multitude (7:9-17)**

**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. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:**

**"Salvation belongs to our God,**

**who sits on the throne,**

**and to the Lamb." (7:9-10)**

John has heard that the number of the sealed is 144,000. Now he looks and sees a great multitude beyond counting. Notice the juxtaposition of what John hears and what he sees: he hears 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel; he sees an innumerable multitude from every nation. We've encountered this juxtaposition before: John heard the identity of the one able to unseal the scroll, the Lion who has conquered. He then saw the Lamb who was slain. This juxtaposition of what is heard and what is seen is a technique for expressing identity between two seemingly contradictory images. It is God's servants who are sealed. Who are they? On the one hand they are the 144,000 from all Israel, carefully assembled and enumerated in fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham; they're all there, a full and complete number, all counted by God. On the other hand, they are a vast multitude drawn from every nation, Jew and Gentile, including Egypt, Babylon and Philistia, including Afghanistan, Iraq and North Korea. They're a number beyond human ability to count, but they're all carefully enumerated by God.

This great multitude is drawn from every nation, tribe, people and language. Here is another of the many key phrases that are used repeatedly in this book. The order and the actual terms might vary, but it's always a four-fold list, indicating universality; the list is given seven times (5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15). The beast is given (note again that little word *edothē*, "it was given") authority "over every tribe, people, language and nation" (13:7). But God is plundering the beast's kingdom, assembling people from "every nation, tribe, people and language" around his throne (5:9; 7:9). He does so through the eternal gospel that is for "every nation, tribe, language and people" (14:6). The tyrannical power of the beast is no match for the seeming weakness of the slain Lamb. That's the motivation for missions: that God, through the blood of the seemingly-weak slain Lamb, is plundering the kingdom of the seemingly-powerful dragon, Satan, and his seemingly-powerful henchman, the beast. The message of salvation rings loud through Revelation, louder than that of judgment. In the end there will be a redeemed, renewed and restored cosmos, not a destroyed one. Yet in so many books about Revelation it is the message of judgment that rings loudest. The message of salvation is expansive: God is saving not just a select few, not just a literal 144,000, but a vast multitude, a symbolic 144,000. Yes, when God comes, he comes in judgment, but he also comes in salvation. Indeed, he comes in judgment so that he might come in salvation, for salvation requires ridding his world of evil.

At the center of the universe stands a throne with one seated upon it. Gathered around this throne we have already seen the four cherubim, the 24 elders, and myriad myriad angels. Now John sees that the circle is bigger still. Here are the saints, gathered at the throne. They're standing in the presence of God and the Lamb. Who can stand? God's people can stand! Yet these are the people who are weak in the eyes of the strong and mighty on earth. Indeed, these are the people who have been killed by the strong and mighty on earth.

They are dressed in white robes, a common metaphor in Revelation, signifying their purity and victory. The palm branches which they carry signify joy. In his instructions for the Feast of Tabernacles, the Lord told the Israelites “to take palm fronds...and rejoice before the Lord your God” (Lev 23:40). Jesus entered Jerusalem accompanied by crowds waving palm branches who shouted out, “Hosanna!” (John 12:13). These crowds have entered not the earthly Jerusalem, but the heavenly one, the heavenly Zion, in whose register their names are recorded. They are following in the footsteps of their king, the slain Lamb, to gather at his throne.

We have already seen the cherubim, the elders and the angels singing to the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb. These singers are heavenly creatures. Now the chorus increases as a new category of singers join in: earthly creatures who have been made fit for heaven. Their song is that salvation comes from God and the Lamb. It doesn't come from their own power or strength. It doesn't come from the dragon, the beast or the false prophet. It doesn't come from Rome or from Caesar. It doesn't come from their education, their job, their stock options, their position in society. Salvation belongs to God and the Lamb, and to them alone.

**All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying:**

**“Amen!**

**Praise and glory  
and wisdom and thanks and honor  
and power and strength  
be to our God for ever and ever.**

**Amen!” (7:11-12)**

Throughout Revelation the heavenly worship around the throne is antiphonal. The song of one group spurs another to respond. The song of the saints spurs the angels to fall on their faces in worship. “Amen,” they sing. “It's true, salvation belongs to God and to the Lamb.” They add a seven-fold ascription of praise to God: all praise is due to him, nothing is to be held back.

Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?”

I answered, “Sir, you know.”

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. (7:13-14)

An elder asks John if he knows who these white-robed worshippers are and whence they have come. He is never asked where the cherubim, the elders, or the angels have come from. Since they are heavenly creatures, their presence around the throne is quite natural. But the presence of this multitude is not so. They are not native to heaven. Who are these newcomers, and whence have they come? They have come through the great tribulation. Are these only those who have come through the seven-year Great Tribulation of the End Times? The dispensationalist believes so: the 144,000 are Jews who are converted during the Great Tribulation; this multitude is the vast number of Gentiles who are converted during the same Great Tribulation.

What then of us? Do we who live before that supposed Great Tribulation have no place in that vast crowd? The New Testament cautions us repeatedly that tribulation is the expected lot of the believer. It is only because American Christians have been spared tribulation

that they can think that the Great Tribulation is in the future. It is those who sit in comfortable armchairs who develop timelines of a future Great Tribulation, not those who are in prison for their faith, or those who are being burnt at the stake. Their great tribulation is present. The prospect of martyrdom for their witness is real.

The NIV identifies the crowd as those “who have come out of the great tribulation.” But the verb is a present participle, “those who are coming out.” Throughout the whole period of great tribulation, which I think spans the entire period between the two advents of Jesus, God's people are coming out into heaven. How do they come out? They come out by washing their robes in the blood of the Lamb. On the one hand they are given white robes to wear. On the other, their robes are white because they themselves have washed them. God is at work and his servants are at work. It is the Lamb who redeems them through his blood. But the blood of the Lamb here is probably not the blood of salvation but rather the blood of martyrdom. God's servants are called to follow the Lamb through martyrdom. However, in Revelation the blood of salvation and the blood of martyrdom are scarcely differentiable. The Lamb is the prototype martyr. He is the faithful witness whose faithful witness brought his death. But he is also the firstborn from the dead, for death could not hold him. It is as the slain but risen martyr that he is able to save. Those he saves are called to walk in his footsteps as faithful witnesses. They too will die for their witness, but death cannot hold them either. It is as the slain Lamb that he redeems people unto God. It is as the firstborn from the dead that he leads God's people through death into heaven.

Therefore,

**“They are before the throne of God**

**and serve him day and night in his temple;**

**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 upon them,**

**nor any scorching heat.**

**For the Lamb at the center 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.” (7:15-17)**

The elder closes with a wonderful description of the destiny and rewards of those who have followed the Lamb through death into heaven. Here we find the fulfillment of multiple strands of Old Testament imagery. Their greatest reward is welcome before God's throne. There they find that they are home at the end of a race well run. There they find acceptance from the one in whose presence they can stand. There they will serve their God day and night in his temple, just as the temple musicians served him day and night in his earthly temple (1 Chr 9:33). But their song is far richer than the song of the temple musicians, for they have more to sing about. Their song is addressed not just to God, but also to the Lamb.

The one seated upon the throne will spread his tent over them. Throughout the Old Testament God expresses his purposes toward Israel, “I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you.” After he had brought Israel out of Egypt and constituted them as his people, he had them build him a tabernacle, a tent in which he might dwell in their midst while they journeyed through the wilderness in their tents, on pilgrimage to the Promised Land. That's what the Feast of Tabernacles commemorates. But having God



dwell among his people in a man-made tent is only second-best, even though a remarkable act of condescension on God's part. But there is another pilgrimage and another tent. After their pilgrimage through this present life God welcomes his people home to his tent in the greater Promised Land. Here they hear the great declaration, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (21:3). Here they may truly wave their palm branches and rejoice. They are home!

The goal of Israel's exodus from Egypt was the Promised Land. But, because of Israel's persistent sin, God eventually expelled them from that land, out the other side to Babylon. That was judgment, but, again, God's ultimate goal is salvation not judgment. Therefore, through his prophet Isaiah, he addressed a message of hope and salvation to his people in captivity in Babylon. He told Isaiah

**to say to the captives, "Come out,"  
and to those in darkness, "Be free!"...  
They will neither hunger nor thirst,  
nor will the desert heat or the sun beat upon them.  
He who has compassion on them will guide them  
and lead them beside springs of water. (Isa 49:9-10)**

Revelation likewise urges God's people to come out of Babylon, not to return to Jerusalem, but to journey to the New Jerusalem, of which the earthly Zion was but a picture. There, safe in God's shelter, they will enjoy his protection and provision. Never again will they hunger or thirst. Never again will the elements harm them. Never again: their pilgrimage through the wilderness is over, and they are home.

These pilgrims, who have followed the Lamb to the throne, now follow him to the pastures to which he leads them. Here he shepherds them as they drink from the springs of living water, the fountain of life. He is the Good Shepherd who cares for his sheep, the sheep whom he has saved by being the sacrificial lamb.

Isaiah told God's captive people in Babylon that when he brought salvation to Mount Zion he would swallow up even death itself,

**On this mountain he will destroy  
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,  
the sheet that covers all nations;  
he will swallow up death forever.  
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears  
from all faces;  
he will remove the disgrace of his people  
from all the earth.  
The LORD has spoken. (Isa 25:7-8)**

The first death has been robbed of its sting for all those redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, for the Lamb is the firstborn from the dead, leading an innumerable multitude in his train. He leads them to the throne where God himself wipes away all tears: the tears of pain, of sorrow, of suffering, and of death.

Whose are this destiny and these rewards? Only those Gentiles converted during the Great Tribulation? No, these are for all God's people. The 144,000 from all Israel and the innumerable multitude from all nations are two expressions for the same reality: the full, complete and vast company of God's servants. These are the ones

on whose foreheads is placed the seal of the living God. Sadly, the seal of God tends to get forgotten amidst all the speculation over the mark of the beast. Every person in Revelation bears something on his forehead: either the mark of the beast or the seal of God. There is no one who is not so marked. We don't understand God's seal as a literal seal on our forehead. Why then is there so much interest in trying to identify the physical nature of the mark of the beast? It's not a barcode or an imbedded computer chip. Revelation itself identifies the mark of the beast and the seal of God.

As I'll keep on saying, Revelation portrays a black-and-white world. There are only two sets of people, two destinies, two cities, and so on. One set of people bears the mark of the beast, which is his name. They belong to the beast. Bearing his mark is equated with worshiping him (14:9,11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). The other set of people bears the seal of God, which is the name of God and the Lamb. They have been liberated from the beast's kingdom and now belong to God and the Lamb. Everyone in Revelation worships: those who bear the mark of the beast worship the beast. Those who bear the seal of God worship God and the Lamb.

Everyone is at home in one of two cities. Those marked by the beast are at home in Babylon, the so-called eternal city of earth. But Babylon will fall. Those sealed by the Lamb are called to come out of Babylon and head to the truly eternal city which is in heaven, the New Jerusalem. They enter that city by coming through death. Because they are sealed by God, this first death cannot harm them.

Everyone is headed to a destiny. Those with the mark of the beast are headed to the second death, eternal separation from God in the lake of fire. Those with the seal of God are headed through the first death, following in the footsteps of the Lamb to the throne. The Lamb takes his seat on that throne, while his followers gather around that throne and add their song to those already being sung by the heavenly creatures.

**"Salvation belongs to our God,  
who sits on the throne,  
and to the Lamb."...  
"Praise and glory  
and wisdom and thanks and honor  
and power and strength  
be to our God for ever and ever.  
Amen!" (7:10-12)**

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. (Heb 13:20-21)

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