

GOD'S CHURCH STANDS FOREVER – REVELATION 7:1-8

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¹After 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. ² 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: ³ “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.” ⁴ Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel. ⁵ From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben 12,000, from the tribe of Gad 12,000, ⁶ from the tribe of Asher 12,000, from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000, from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000, ⁷ from the tribe of Simeon 12,000, from the tribe of Levi 12,000, from the tribe of Issachar 12,000, ⁸ from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000, from the tribe of Joseph 12,000, from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000.



This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,

Back in the 1960s and 1970s, there was a group of people in Wisconsin who were convinced they had discovered the mystery behind the 144,000 who were sealed in this very chapter of Revelation. They were a group of people who were as dedicated to church as they were to their football team. They believed the 144,000 who were sealed had to mean all those who were Packer fans. Because at that time, in the small town market of Green Bay, Wisconsin, Packer fans had not yet spread too far. But then came the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s and even 2010s. Packer fans easily outnumber the 144,000 mentioned in the book of Revelation. So these Packer fans humbly had to dismiss that the 144,000 who were sealed could refer to the actual number of Packer fans.

Now, hopefully all of you were able to see the humor in the story of Packer fans believing they were the literal number of people sealed in Revelation 7. But what can be humorous to us, is actually dead serious to any number of churches. Because there are churches who have taught (and still teach?) the 144,000 who are sealed refers to those people who are in that church. This presents a challenge to the church that grows beyond 144,000.

Unfortunately, many of these churches suffer from a lack of proper understanding not only from Revelation, but also sometimes the rest of the Bible. The book of Revelation is a book of pictures, and pictures are not meant to be taken literalistically. If they were, we would have to admit that Jesus walks around on all fours, has wool and says “Baaa!” But the book of Revelation is not a book to be coolly pondered, or food to feed the dreams of idle men, but it is the cry of victory raised for the cause of Christ when the cause of Christ seemed doomed. In short, the theme of Revelation is: Jesus wins! We take a look today at what this means for Christ’s bride, the church. We find that GOD’S CHURCH STANDS FOREVER.

1. Sealed from harm
2. Complete in number

The book of Revelation was given as a vision to the apostle John who was exiled on a small island off the coast of Italy, called Patmos. It was given precisely because at that time, the young Christian church was undergoing suffering and trials, the likes of which we cannot hold a candle to. John could easily have been wondering if this young church would even survive. And so God gave John a vision of how the church would not only survive, but that GOD'S CHURCH WOULD STAND FOREVER. It would stand forever on its rock, Jesus Christ.

The pattern that John records this vision is such that the destructive nature of the world at the end is repeated and repeated in a number of different ways. But in the midst of that destruction, John is then given an interlude, an interlude describing God's Church. And that's really what chapter 7 is all about. In this first half of chapter 7, God is describing the state of his Church here on earth, while the second half of chapter 7 describes the state of God's Church already in heaven. This is a message of comfort to God's people here on this earth that their labor is not in vain, and it is this that lines up with the message found in the book of Revelation.

The vision in chapter 7 begins with four angels at the four corners of the earth holding back the four destructive winds from blowing on the earth. We learned last week in our Sunday morning Bible Class that the number "four" is representative of the earth, of God's creation. Here is a perfect example of that number being used. Now, are we just talking about a nice and gentle breeze that these angels are holding back? No. These are winds that **"have been given the power to harm the land and the sea."** This wind is representing anything that causes destruction on the earth – both natural or manmade. We have seen examples of both.

But the one thing that is holding back these angels from releasing the four winds is the loud cry of a fifth angel. **"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."** These destructive winds and whatever they represent will be restrained from destroying the faith of God's elect. GOD'S CHURCH STANDS FOREVER, sealed from harm of any evil the world can bring.

We heard in our first lesson for this morning about the people of Israel crossing into the promised land in a miraculous way. God stopped up the waters of the Jordan so Israel could cross over on dry land. This was just one way God preserved his Old Testament people Israel. The God who stopped the waters of the Jordan, is the same God who stops the winds of destruction from destroying his people in the last days. This is not too much for God, after all, we confess in the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in God the Father *Almighty*." Nothing is too much for our God.

So we have God's promise that HIS CHURCH WILL STAND FOREVER sealed from harm. The picture of a seal here can have the idea of ownership and protection – comparable to a brand that is placed upon cattle. Just like an owner will protect his property, God will protect his church from harm. And what a wonderful picture of comfort for the early Christian Church. The all-powerful, almighty God was their God. We too confess in the Apostle's Creed that Jesus Christ is "reigning at the right hand of God the Father," working out all things for the good of his Church. However, this harm that he is protecting us from is not always the physical harm of persecution, but harm that can damage our faith.

There have been a number of examples of people trying to eradicate Christianity from the earth – from the Apostle Paul and the Roman Empire (for a time), to militant radicals and modern day atheists like Richard Dawkins. They have succeeded to a certain degree either by burning or beheading, but that really isn't what counts in God's eyes. The apostle Peter confesses, **“All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever.’ And this is the word that was preached to you.”** God's Word is never going away, he has seen to that. And since God's Word isn't going away, neither is his Church. His Church will remain in this world until the end and will be sealed from spiritual harm.

(2)

“Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.” Now we know from the rest of Scripture that those who believe in Jesus Christ are part of his Church and he will take them to be with him in heaven, but maybe you're wondering if this section of Revelation really talking about the same thing? Didn't John just say 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel will be sealed? There are many commentators who will use this as an explanation that God will call back 144,000 Jews from the tribes of Israel. Could God do that? Of course he can, he is Almighty after all. But is that really what he is saying here?

Once again we are reminded that the book of Revelation is filled with pictures. This picture of the 12 tribes of Israel being sealed is just one of them. Nowhere else in all of Scripture are the 12 tribes listed in this way, in fact two of the 12 tribes are missing – Dan and Ephraim, replaced by Levi and Joseph. It just takes too many Scriptural gymnastics to say this will happen. The 144,000 sealed are not 144,000 Jewish people. To say that God could call 144,000 Jews to faith and saying that he will are two different things.

Instead it fits better in the context of Holy Scripture and the book of Revelation to see this as God's Church, his new Israel. In the book of Romans, Paul constantly refers to God's Church, believers, as Israel. Here too in Revelation 7, it fits nicely together – with the first half of the chapter describing God's Church here on earth – scholars call this the Church militant. The second half of the chapter describes God's Church in heaven – called the Church triumphant.

The number listed is another one of those numbers with symbolic meaning. Bear with me as I go through “12” is the number of God's Church, “10” is the number of completeness. 144,000 is $12^2 \times 10^3$. The other place where the number 144,000 is listed in Revelation gives us a clue as to who is all included, **“Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads.”** The 144,000 who are sealed are the body of believers, Christ's church, and they are complete in number.

We certainly don't deserve to be counted in this number. With all of the times we have fallen short of God's glory, for all of the times we have believed God couldn't possibly forgive what I have done, for all of the times we think we've been good enough. For the reason we are counted among that number, we can turn back to our gospel for this morning. We find in our gospel how there were many people who were saying many good things about Jesus. But good things and the right thing are not the same. It was Peter who gave the right answer, **“You are the Christ, the Son of God.”** Jesus tells us this was not

revealed by man, but by God in heaven. For God not only gives us his grace, he gives us faith to believe this grace.

This is what counts us in that complete number of 144,000, not anything we have done, but what has been done for us. And you want to know another neat point of comparison? The Old Testament book of Ezekiel describes a vision of the elect being sealed. They would be marked or sealed with the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, a letter that looks surprisingly similar to a cross. This is a good reminder of what seals us, the cross of Christ makes us worthy of being counted among that number. It is the cross of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ that includes us in that complete number of God's Church.

The book of Revelation certainly can be a challenge to work through, not only because of all of the mystical and incredulous things spoken about it, but simply because of all of the pictures and imagery it brings in from the rest of Scripture. But it is not meant as a book to be afraid of, but a book to remind us of God's ultimate victory. What believers know now will be made visible when Christ returns. Jesus has already won the victory, judgment day will just reveal that to the world. And because Jesus has won the victory, we know that his bride, THE CHURCH WILL STAND FOREVER – sealed from harm, and complete in number. Amen.