

# The Saving of the Church

Revelation 7:1-8:1; 14:1-5

*Russ Kennedy*

What is your view of being saved? Saved from myself? Saved from my horrible life? Saved from sin? The book of Revelation focuses on our being saved to God.

Last week we saw the suffering of the church in Revelation 6. We can summarize what we saw there in a neat comparison between Matthew 24 and Revelation 6 that will prepare us for the text we are considering. James McConkey has summarized for us.<sup>7</sup>

## Matthew 24—Revelation Comparison

	Matthew 24 Text		Revelation Text	Seal #	
Gospel	(v. 14)	<b>General signs</b>	Gospel	(6:1–2)	1
War	(v. 6)		War	(6:3–4)	2
Famine	(v. 7)		Famine	(6:5–6)	3
Pestilence	(v. 7)		Pestilence	(6:7–8)	4
		<b>Special signs</b>			
Tribulation	(vv. 15–28)		Tribulation	(6:9–11)	5
Heavenly signs	(v. 29)		Heavenly signs	(6:12–17)	6
Second advent	(vv. 30–31)		Second advent	(8:1–19:21)	7

Through John we see the saving of the church, the salvation of God’s people...

## The Setting of their Saving

(v. 1-3)

<sup>1</sup> After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree. <sup>2</sup> Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, <sup>3</sup> saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads."

### What: A Sequence of Scenes

I want to bring your attention to a phrase that occurs here and others that are similar. John writes, "After this I saw..." Some commentators insist that this means, "I saw this happen after this..." as though John is seeing events happening one after the other. These commentators generally treat the book of Revelation as being linear in time, with events happening concurrently or sequentially.

But that is not what John actually said. He said, "After seeing what I saw (in chapter 6) I saw this next..." It is not the events that are sequential but rather the visions themselves.

### When: During the Last Days

As I have asserted before, I believe the visions generally are multiple camera angles on largely the same events. Those events are the last days. The last days began at the resurrection of Christ and will continue to the return of Christ (Acts 2:17; Hebrews 1:2). There will be an escalation and compression of the events in the last seven years of the history of the Old Creation. Then there will be the return, the resurrection (John 6:39-54) and the final judgment (John 12:48) on the last day.

### Why: Hope for God's People

I want to highlight something here that is often lost in expositions of Revelation. This book is supposed to be a comfort to God's people. It is supposed to encourage them to persevere during the dark and hard days. But the book is often taught as though evil and calamity have the upper hand. But that is not what God wants us to see. Over and over again we will have scenes like that here in verses 1-3. God is holding back disaster. He is controlling it. He is dispensing it out at exactly the time of His choosing. It is measured out. Yes, it is disasters and destruction the like of which has not been seen on the earth since Noah's flood.

I can say this no better than Michael Wilcox.

What the six seals have revealed is in fact a fearful and comprehensive harming of the earth, symbolized by the dread horsemen. In chapter 7 the depth of focus increases, our plane of vision is, so to speak, nearer to God, and where we saw four horsemen, with a veiled reference to a divine permission allowing them to ride forth, we now perceive four winds, which have power to harm the earth, but are controlled by four angels of God. It is a new view of the same thing, and the corresponding visions in the prophecy of Zechariah support this identification by linking four horse-drawn chariots with the four winds of God (Zc. 6:1-5, RV). But the further truth which here comes into focus is this: God's

control over the horsemen/winds ensures that his church is sealed and secure *before they ride forth*.

The Old Testament parallel to this is in Ezekiel 9, where 'a man clothed in linen' is told to 'put a mark upon the foreheads' of God's faithful people, before the six 'executioners of the city' smite it with his wrath (verses 1-4). The New Testament explanation of it is given by Paul in Ephesians 1:13 f. We were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit when we first put our faith in Christ. From that moment forward, our ultimate safety was guaranteed. So when the searing winds begin to blow, the servant of God is found to have been sealed already against their power. The horsemen ride out on their career of destruction; but the church has been made indestructible.<sup>8</sup>

So we are take heart - our sovereign God is in control and He is ordering the end of the world according to His plan. We may suffer much in those days. But we will be preserved by His power and delivered from His wrath.

## The Sealing of the Sons

(v. 3-8)

Now let's consider the parallel texts from Revelation 7 and 14.

First, Revelation 7:4-8:

<sup>3</sup> [saying,] "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads." <sup>4</sup> And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel:

<sup>5</sup> 12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed,  
 12,000 from the tribe of Reuben,  
 12,000 from the tribe of Gad,  
<sup>6</sup> 12,000 from the tribe of Asher,  
 12,000 from the tribe of Naphtali,  
 12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh,  
<sup>7</sup> 12,000 from the tribe of Simeon,  
 12,000 from the tribe of Levi,  
 12,000 from the tribe of Issachar,  
<sup>8</sup> 12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun,  
 12,000 from the tribe of Joseph,  
 12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed.

And now Revelation 14:1-5:

<sup>1</sup> Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. <sup>2</sup> And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, <sup>3</sup> and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. <sup>4</sup> It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb, <sup>5</sup> and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.

Clearly, John is seeing the same group in both of these visions. The huge question here is; who are these 144,000?

The literalist view says that there are 12,000 from each tribe of Israel who are sealed. They are Jews, males, virgins, redeemed, perfect, go with Jesus everywhere, singers of a song only they know (you can't have some of it literal and some of it not) and are preachers of the gospel during the Tribulation Period.

Is John seeing something that is meant to be figurative, apocalyptic, stylistic? I believe so. Several interpretive problems lead me to disagree with the literal view.<sup>9</sup>

1. The tribes are in an order never given anywhere else with Judah first instead of Reuben.
2. Joseph is clearly listed as a tribe when he is not counted or listed as a tribe in the Old Testament.
3. The tribes of Dan and Ephraim are left out. While there may be explanations as to why they were left out, it does seem odd to do so in this text without precedent, without explanation and without apparent reason.
4. Twelve in apocalyptic literature and in the book of Revelation refers to full completeness. Multiples of twelve's occur frequently.
5. According to Paul and Peter, the distinction between Israel and the church is broken down by the cross. There is no separate purpose for the Israel. All the promises are fulfilled in Christ. Jews, physical sons of Abraham, are distinguishable - but not Israel as a nation.
6. Nothing here indicates they are preachers of the gospel during the tribulation period. They are identified in both texts and then seemed to simply melded in with the great multitude gathered before the throne.
7. To take all of it literally, which you would have to do to be consistent, leads to a group of people whose purpose for being a distinct group is not disclosed in the text at all.

Further, Greg Beale writes:

Gentile believers are clearly identified together with "the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel" as part of the new Jerusalem (21:12, 14, 24; 22:2-5), then it is not odd that John should refer to them together with Jewish Christians in 7:4 as "the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel." This receives confirmation from the prior observation that the "sealing" of 7:2-3 is equivalent to believers receiving a "name." And it is clear that one of the names written on Gentile Christians, in addition to the names of God and Christ, is "the name of the new Jerusalem" (3:12), which is a virtual reference to all Christians as "new" Israel. However, this name is not written on those "who say they are Jews, and are not" true Jews (cf. 3:9, 12).<sup>10</sup>

In my view, this is representative of sealed and redeemed Jews during the last days, the whole eschatological period. They may be the Jewish remnant mentioned by Paul in

Romans 11. They are the first harvest with the full harvest of Gentiles to follow. So while there is no separate purpose there is a distinguishable group. All these who are redeemed appear in heaven in this text. I think that is precisely the point.

## The Singing of the Saints

(v. 9-17)

John has seen the angels holding back the soon coming dooms. He has heard the announcement of the sealing of the sons of Israel. Next, the camera takes him before the throne of God where he sees and hears a vast throng.

## Who They Are

(v. 9-12)

<sup>9</sup> After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, <sup>10</sup> and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" <sup>11</sup> And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, <sup>12</sup> saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

The identity of this multitude is clear. They are an innumerable throng of people from all the people groups. They are standing before the throne of God, clothed in white garments of righteousness, palm branches waving in triumph. They are shouting the closing of Psalm 3:8. Listen to how fitting the whole Psalm is in the context of Revelation 6-7!

<sup>1</sup> O LORD, how many are my foes!

Many are rising against me;

<sup>2</sup> many are saying of my soul,

there is no salvation for him in God. *Selah*

<sup>3</sup> But you, O LORD, are a shield about me,  
my glory, and the lifter of my head.

<sup>4</sup> I cried aloud to the LORD,

and he answered me from his holy hill. *Selah*

<sup>5</sup> I lay down and slept;

I woke again, for the LORD sustained me.

<sup>6</sup> I will not be afraid of many thousands of people  
who have set themselves against me all around.

<sup>7</sup> Arise, O LORD!

Save me, O my God!

For you strike all my enemies on the cheek;  
you break the teeth of the wicked.

<sup>8</sup> Salvation belongs to the LORD;

your blessing be on your people! *Selah*

This is the full church having arrived safely at home. They have experienced the fullness of their salvation. What mighty shouts of praise roll down the halls of heaven lifted by the innumerable multitude of the redeemed and the hosts of angelic attendants.

### Where They Are From

(v. 13-14)

<sup>13</sup> Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" <sup>14</sup> I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.

In the vision, one of the elders around the throne poses a question. He does not expect John to know the answer but rather is creating an opportunity for him to answer. John's reply is Greek idiom, "You know the answer to the question and I would like to know as well."

The answer is that these are those who have come out of the great tribulation. Why is this said here this way? It seems to me that John is making another connection to Matthew 24. Remember that the book of Revelation is built on Daniel, Zechariah and Matthew 24. It corresponds to 1st and 2nd Thessalonians. So all through the book we get markers that are supposed to locate us in a timeline clearly established in other teaching. John is then connecting us to what Jesus taught in Matthew 24:15-31

<sup>15</sup> "So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), <sup>16</sup> then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. <sup>17</sup> Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, <sup>18</sup> and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. <sup>19</sup> And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! <sup>20</sup> Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath. <sup>21</sup> For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. <sup>22</sup> And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. ... [v.23-28, omitted]

<sup>29</sup> "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. <sup>30</sup> Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. <sup>31</sup> And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

The tribulation begins in the middle of Daniel's 70 week. As it escalates toward the Day of the Lord it is also known as the Great Tribulation. Some of you will need to adjust your thinking to align with the text. The tribulation is not the whole 7 years, but rather the 3 ½ years begun at the abomination of desolation.

Our markers then are verses 29 and 31 – these are those who are coming out of the tribulation time through martyrdom and through the ingathering at the end. Then there will follow the great gathering of the elect from all over the world at the sound of the

trumpet is the rapture, the catching away of the church out of this world to meet the Lord coming from heaven (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

Where is this vast multitude from? Out of terrible suffering and destruction they are arriving before the throne gathered by God's purpose, plan and power saved and delivered from the Day of His awful Wrath.

### **What They Enjoy**

**(v. 14-17)**

They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

<sup>15</sup> 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 shelter them with his presence.

<sup>16</sup> They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;  
the sun shall not strike them,  
nor any scorching heat.

<sup>17</sup> For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,  
and he will guide them to springs of living water,  
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Everything about this portion of text is meant to convey hope, comfort and encouragement. We don't feel it in our O so comfortable situation now. But to saints who live under constant threat of imprisonment, deprivation, destruction and death, here is true hope and comfort indeed.

The description of what they enjoy is connected to the promises made to the overcomers in Revelation 1-2. It is also descriptive of the blessings given to all of God's redeemed people. The way John sees this and how it is written highlights the continuum between believers still serving on earth and the believers who are in the presence of God. It highlights the discontinuity between what was and what will then have come.

Here are some words to capture what the people of God enjoy and are comforted by. God's people are:

Saved – blood washed righteousness.

Serving – working God in His church and before His throne.

Supplied – deprivation past and fullness of provision given.

Sheltered – protected under the hand of God.

Shepherded – guided and guarded by the good, great and chief Shepherd.

Soothed – every tear wiped away.

This is our already and not yet experience. We know the foretaste of this in this life. We will experience the fullness in the life to come.

Interlude over we return to the opening of the seals, Revelation 8:1.

<sup>1</sup> When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

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## Reflect and Respond

I would like to call you to not respond to this text with schematic curiosity or dismay. For all the glory, encouragement, hope in it, it would exceedingly sad to get caught in the issue of the 144,000.

Make no mistake, this encouragement and comfort will be needed in the dark days that will immediately precede the coming of the Lord. But what hope-giving glory shines out of this text into the darkness and hardness of that hour.

Here we are. God's people. Safe at home. Saved, serving, supplied, sheltered, shepherded, soothed.

In any hour at all times even in the darkest of days, may we shout to the throne:

<sup>5</sup> I lay down and slept;  
I woke again, for the LORD sustained me.  
<sup>6</sup> I will not be afraid of many thousands of people  
who have set themselves against me all around.  
<sup>7</sup> Arise, O LORD!  
Save me, O my God!  
For you strike all my enemies on the cheek;  
you break the teeth of the wicked.  
<sup>8</sup> **Salvation belongs to the LORD;**  
**your blessing be on your people! *Selah***

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<sup>7</sup> James H. McConkey, *The Book of Revelation* (© Copyright 1921, Silver Publishing Co., Pittsburgh, Pa.).

<sup>8</sup> Wilcock, Michael. *The Message of Revelation: I Saw Heaven Opened*. The Bible Speaks Today. Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986. P.79.

<sup>9</sup> "If our numbers are specified even more closely, and oddly, in that each of the twelve tribes, whether large or small, contributes just 12,000; and if the tribes are listed in an order found nowhere else in the Bible; and if one of them (Dan) is omitted altogether, and the lack made up by including one of Joseph's sons as well as Joseph himself; then the description of us is very stylized indeed."

Wilcock, Michael. *The Message of Revelation*

<sup>10</sup> Beale, G. K. *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999. P. 417.