

**Introduction:**

- A. Do you ever watch any of those apocalyptic movies, or read the books? You know, where the world is nothing but ashen ruins and wrecks, and the bewildered survivors have nowhere left to turn. Around 95 AD the Apostle John had *the* apocalyptic vision—the *Revelation*—perhaps the most mysterious part of the Bible. We’re looking at seven scenes from that book. Last week, in Rev 6, we saw how the Lamb—Jesus Christ who was sacrificed for us—opened the seals on the scroll that contains God’s decree for the end of the world. We saw the four horsemen—the human depravity that stampedes through our world right now, and the Christian martyrs crying out to God for vindication. Then as the Lamb opened the sixth seal we saw the world itself in convulsions, marking the second coming of Christ. Finally, those who have refused the salvation of God, and who have never bowed before the Lord, must face the God. **6:15-17...** Or to put it another way, *“Who can stand?”*
- B. So when that happens, what will become of us in all this? The very reason the Lord Jesus Christ appeared to the Apostle John to give us this book of Revelation was so we will know the answer to that question. This book doesn’t answer all our questions about the future, but it surely answers this one: ***What will become of those who love Christ?*** Turn to **Rev. 7**. As with virtually every scene in this book, Christians don’t all agree on what these symbolic visions mean, but the assurances the Lord gives to those who persevere in following Christ is unmistakable.

**7:1-8...** Who are these 144,000 servants of God? It isn’t real obvious! They’re referred to again in chap. 14. One option is that they are Jews who turn to Jesus Christ during the seven-year Tribulation just before Jesus returns to reign. That could be right. I’ll give you another option. What I’ll tell is true and I think this

scene portrays this truth that the Bible teaches elsewhere. This scene is meant to encourage the beleaguered church, not just to tell the future. I'd summarize it this way:

**I. REST ASSURED THAT EVEN NOW GOD SEALS ALL HIS SERVANTS AGAINST HARM (7:1-8)**

- A. Four great angels hold back devastating winds at the four corners of the earth until God's servants can be sealed against harm. This is symbolic imagery, of course. It isn't about four literal corners, nor is it about hurricanes and tornadoes. These ill winds are symbols of devastation constantly sweeping the earth because of human depravity. I think it is similar to the image of the four horsemen; a way of seeing the world we live in right now.
- B. The point here is that before Christ the Lamb allowed such devastation he made sure that a seal of protection was put upon the foreheads of the servants of God (v.3). When God releases trouble upon the world, we as his people certainly feel it and are touched by it, but we are not *harmed* because God promises to protect our souls, even when our bodies suffer. This is a bedrock Christian truth. I stand at hospital bedsides—*hospitals*—and read **Ps 91:9-10...** The Victorian preacher, **Charles Spurgeon**, put it this way: *"It is impossible that any ill should happen to the [person] who is beloved of the Lord. Ill to him is no ill, but only good in a mysterious form. Losses enrich him, sickness is his medicine, reproach is his honour, death is his gain."* [Wilcock, p.83].
- C. So what's the deal with the 144,000? V.4... Numbers are very significant symbols in Revelation. Twelve, or its multiples, is always a symbol of completion—12 tribes and 12 apostles, for example. Here is 12 x 12 x 1000. Perfection squared and multiplied. Is this talking about Jews? It refers to *"all the tribes of Israel."* This isn't really about the political nation of Israel, per se, but about the descendants of Abraham who trust God as he did.

To understand, we need to take a little Bible road trip. Turn to **Is. 49** (p.548). We know this passage is supposed to come to mind because **Is 49:10** is quoted directly just a few verses later. It helps us understand who the 144,000 are. God gave this message to encourage his afflicted people Israel. It begins with a “Servant Song”—the words of the coming Messiah. Notice how he begins talking about the faraway Gentile lands: **v.1a...** Then **vv.5-6...** Later God promises Israel that even though they are devastated and barren as a nation due to his judgment on their sin, God will give them a huge family: **v.22...** This is what God promised Abraham when he said, “*All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.*” Peoples will be *blessed* by becoming part of God’s nation of Israel, and Israel will be blessed by becoming one international people.

So back to **Rev. 7**. I believe, along with many others, that John sees here God putting his seal of protection upon his complete, perfect nation. **The message to all who persevere in following Christ is that even though this world is swept by ill winds, we are protected by God.**

**Vv.9-14...** Here is another great assurance:

**II. REST ASSURED THAT ALL GOD’S WHITE-ROBED SERVANTS WILL STAND JOYFULLY BEFORE HIS THRONE (7:9-14)**

Here we are again, seen in a different frame.

- A. We just *heard* that the symbolic census of God’s holy people is 144,000; perfect times perfect times a thousand. Now we see what we were *told* about—“*a great multitude that no one could count.*” We had just *heard* that God’s servants were perfectly apportioned from the twelve tribes of Israel, but now when we *look* at them, we see that God’s innumerable people are drawn from “*every nation, tribe, people and language.*” All over the world people yearn for a kind of ‘brotherhood of all mankind,’ but it never happens. We keep killing each other! But God

will make it happen through Christ. Our church here, with many nationalities represented, is a microcosm of the multitude that will gather in heaven.

- B. And look where we are: *“standing before the throne and before the Lamb.”* While others dread the face of God, we stand safely in the presence of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. This is where we belong; where we are most naturally at home; in the company of the God who created, loves and redeems us. This is not only a picture of a great king with his subjects. This is a Father gathering his children, and a Bridegroom welcoming his bride.
- C. As diverse as Jesus’ disciples are, we are pictured here with these two things in common—again important symbols: (v.9) “wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands.” Waving palm branches is an ancient sign of celebration, like the way we wave pennants or signs or flags when our heroes pass by. We’ll return to the white robes in a moment.

That great multi-cultural multitude is shouting something. Can you hear it? *“Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”* We are a rescued people, people who would have died forever had it not been for God and the sacrificed Lamb he sent to save us. I believe our everlasting life in the new heaven and new earth will be endlessly interesting and varied, but one thing will never change. We will never cease to be amazed that God, through Christ, found a way to save the likes of us. We won’t be *required* to shout of God’s salvation in heaven; we won’t be able to help ourselves!

This vast crowd of people is joined by all the angels and mighty agents of heaven as a kind of antiphonal choir—we praising God for our salvation, and they worshiping him for all the qualities he displayed in saving us. The hosts of heaven have always worshipped God but now, seeing us, they have even more reason to worship.

**Robert Mounce**, remembering Jesus' story of the one lost sheep found by the shepherd, writes, *"If there is 'joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents' (Lk 15:10), how unbelievably great will be the joyful adoration of the heavenly host when **all** the redeemed stand before their God!"* [p.172]

Back to the white robes. The sense is that all the angels fit naturally into the scene, but these in white robes are a surprise; they need to be identified. **Vv.13-14...** There are two things we need to know:

First, *"they have come out of the great tribulation"*—the great *oppression*, the great *pressure*. I don't think this is speaking of the 7-year period we call "the tribulation." Remember, this is a book written to Christians in the first century who were already under tremendous pressure. *Pressure, tribulation*, is a word Christians better get used to. It is used 45 times in the New Testament. It is the Christian's way of life. **To "come out of" this terrible pressure means these people were not crushed by it; they did not forsake their faith in Christ even when the world constantly pressured them to do so.**

But only being faithful to Christ would not have gotten us to this safe place before God. We must have this: "They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." That simply means that they trusted Jesus' death on the cross to make them clean before God. He died for *our* sins, so we could be forgiven by the righteous God. Now God sees those who trust Jesus as being as clean and pure as Jesus himself was. All the people who are pictured here—who are sealed by God now and will be with him forever—are people who are washed white by the blood of Jesus, and who do not give up their faith in him no matter how great the pressure.

**Rest assured that all God's white-robed servants will stand before his throne.**

**V.15** begins with the word *“Therefore.”* The **results** of being cleansed by the blood of Christ and of persevering in our faith are wonderful. There is an Old Testament picture that helps us understand what we’re told here. It is of the people of Israel, freed from bondage in Egypt, but then making their way across a vast and withering wilderness to the land God had promised them. God led them with pillars of cloud and fire. God himself dwelt among them in the tabernacle he had them build. He provided manna from heaven for them to eat, and led them to water when there was none to be found. But it was a time where faith was taught and tested, and often not found. Many Israelites died, faithless, in that wilderness. It is a picture every believer relates to—we, too, are in a hot and merciless wilderness where our faith is tested and tried. We echo Psalm 63 which David wrote when he was in the desert: *“You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water.”* Some of you were in that very desert this week. So with that in mind, this is why heaven will be so great for God’s people: **vv.15-17...**

### **III. REST ASSURED THAT GOD’S PEOPLE WILL BE FOREVER SAFE WITH HIM (7:15-17)**

- A. There is this silly misconception that heaven will be boring; that we’ll just *stand* there forever. Illus.: I remember a *Far Side* cartoon showing a guy sitting on a cloud in heaven, thinking, *“I wish I’d brought a magazine.”* The Bible gives some hints at the astonishing things we will do there, but here it simply says that we will *“serve him day and night in his temple.”* The twist is that in heaven, *we* are his temple. God lives in our midst. Serving there won’t be hushed shuffling to and fro, muttering in Latin, and going through religious motions. But what is certainly true is that we will serve God unhindered by the world’s weeds. It will be the best job you ever had; work that will never wear you out, always ennobling and challenging and delightful; service full of love for God and sure to bring him joy in you.

- B. **V.15b-16...** We leave the blistering barrenness and heat of this world and find ourselves forever in the shade of God. When Israel made its way through the wilderness, God's presence was *with* them, but they couldn't go *in* to that tabernacle. Now, because Jesus has made God's presence safe for us, we can be forever *in* God's presence. We are *now*, actually. Right now, we are safe *in God*. Right now, he is our home. But then, the wilderness will be gone. Faith will be obsolete. Trials will have done their purifying work.
- C. The Lamb will shepherd us to springs of living water (v.17). Earlier we looked for the Lion of Judah and saw this Lamb. Now the Lamb is the Shepherd, because it is Jesus who died for us who will lead us forever to endlessly refreshing life. In **Jn 7:38**, Jesus shouted to us all, "*Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink.*" And so we shall forever. Our Good Shepherd is our everlasting source of living water.
- D. I don't know if there is a more tender statement in all the Bible than the last line of **v.17**, "*And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*" Illus.: I often think of an African-American funeral sermon entitled, "Go Down, Death," remembered by James Weldon Johnson. It tells of God sending the angel Death to bring Sister Caroline safely home.

*And Death took her up like a baby,...*  
*And death began to ride again--*  
*Up beyond the evening star,*  
*Into the glittering light of glory,*  
*On to the Great White Throne.*  
*And there he laid Sister Caroline*  
*On the loving breast of Jesus.*

*And Jesus took his own hand and wiped away her tears,*  
*And he smoothed the furrows from her face,*  
*And the angels sang a little song,*

*And Jesus rocked her in his arms,  
And kept a-saying: Take your rest,  
Take your rest.*

## **Conclusion**

**In this terrible world, swept by the ill-winds of sin and suffering, Christians must be anchored in these reassurances given us by Christ.** Whether we are young or old, whether life right now is tormented or calm, we need to think often of these scenes, lest we lose heart, or forget which way is home.

Illus.: A week ago I visited two elderly ladies, one after the other. When I visited Belle, I read to her what I have written about her in my book:

Not long ago I visited Belle in the hospital. She is 95 and I had first met her when she came to the retirement community service. The Thursday evening I preached about the shepherd seeking the one lost sheep, Belle wept through most of it. I think that was the night Jesus carried her back to the flock from the wilds. When I visited her hospital room I made sure she was trusting Christ and then I sang some old hymns. "Sing the one about home," she said. So I did, a true benediction, and she mouthed all the words along with me till we got to the end, "I will bring you . . . home."

When I finished reading that, Belle nodded and said, "*That's right.*"

On my way out I noticed another elderly lady I'd met the last time I'd visited. She was in her wheelchair in the common area. And she smiled the most beautiful smile! The first time I saw her smiling I just *knew* she loved Jesus so I went over to meet her. Her name is Jesse Campbell, and she is 93. Her husband of 75 years died last year. When I greeted her this time, she told me she was so excited because she would get to go home the next day.

"*I bet you have a good church at home,*" I said, and she beamed.

"*Trinity A.M.E. Church in Waukegan,*" she said proudly.

*“What’s your favorite hymn” I asked.*

Without a moment’s hesitation, she said, *“Jesus Is All the World to Me.”*

I got down on one knee and took her hand. *“Let’s sing it together,”* I said. *“We’ll see if we can remember the words.”* So there in that common room, with people coming and going, Jesse and I sang, *“Jesus is all the world to me, my life, my joy, my all; He is my strength from day to day, without Him I would fall.”*

After we finished with, *“He’s my friend,”* I stood to go. *“If you’re going home tomorrow, I might never see you again until we meet in heaven,”* I said.

She nodded. *“I’ll see you there!”* she said. And so, somewhere in that white-robed multitude, Belle and Jesse and I will meet again and sing of Jesus.