

The Book of Revelation

Week #8 – The 144,000 of Israel sealed

I. REVIEW OF WEEK #7

In Week 7 we covered the section of Revelation dealing with the coming judgments on Jerusalem pictured consecutively as seven seals.

A. The Seven Seals

As one by one the seals are broken, history unfolds before John’s eyes. The breaking of the seals brings judgment on the earth, which is stained with the innocent blood of the martyrs.

B. Parallels with the Gospels

The similarities of the events in the seven seals with the mini-apocalypses in the synoptic Gospels are striking.

Revelation chapter 6 follows the pattern found in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21 [mini-apocalypses] in which Jesus predicts the coming judgment on the Jerusalem temple, and at the end of the world in terms of:

1. Wars [Rev 6:2; Lk 21:9];
2. International conflict [Rev 6:4; Lk 21:10];
3. Famine [Rev 6:5-6; Lk 21:11];
4. Pestilence [Rev 6:8; Lk 21:11];
5. Persecutions [Rev 6:9; Lk 21:12];
6. Earthquakes [Rev 6:12; Lk 21:11]; and
7. Cosmic disturbances [Rev 6:12-14; Lk 21:25-26].

[See table of comparison of events in Revelation 6 and Matthew 24 in “*Coming Soon*” pages 94 – 95].

C. Fulfillment of Prophecy

All these things did come to pass in the first century and culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in

AD 70. They also prefigure events that will occur near the End of Time.

Eusebius, the Church’s first historian, uses the historical account by Josephus of the destruction of Jerusalem as evidence of the fulfillment of the prophecies of Jesus (and Revelation).

But we must always remember that there are multiple layers of meaning and fulfillment in Scripture.

These Gospel passages don’t just point to the destruction of Jerusalem; they also foreshadow God’s judgment at the end of time.

II. OVERVIEW OF WEEK 8

A. The Faithful and their Persecutors

The fifth seal predicted the persecution of the faithful [the souls under the altar], and the sixth seal the punishment of their persecutors.

B. A Dramatic Pause

At this point we expect the opening of the seventh seal, but suddenly there is a dramatic pause, following the sixth seal, that heightens our suspense and delays the opening of the seventh.

C. The Great Tribulation

John is about to see the last and greatest of the woes as the seventh seal is opened, and in particular the great tribulation which is to come:

“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” [Mt 24:21].

In this coming tribulation there was to be a final assault by every evil power and a final devastation of the earth.

D. Sealing of the Faithful

But before this happens the faithful are sealed with the seal of God – the seal of salvation and divine protection - so as to be

protected from what is to be unleashed at the opening of the seventh seal.

The sealing in Revelation does not symbolize protection “from” death, but protection in and through death. The faithful won’t be exempt from suffering and death but they will be brought safely through them.

The fact that they are not sealed before the woes of the first six seals means that Christians are not to be spared the tribulations which the entire earth will experience.

There will be no rapture of “born-again” Christians before the tribulation.

In Chapter 7 John sees two visions: the remnant of Israel [7:1-8], and the saved of all nations [7:9-17].

E. Summary

There are three elements in this chapter: a warning, an assurance, and a promise.

1. There is *a warning*. The last unparalleled and inconceivable time of tribulation is coming soon.
2. There is an *assurance*. In that time of destruction the faithful will suffer terribly, but they will be brought safely through it because they are sealed with the seal of God.
3. There is a *promise*. When they have passed through that time, they will come to the blessedness in which all pain and sorrow are gone and there is nothing but peace and joy.

III. THE WINDS OF GOD

Read: Revelation 7:1-3

[1] 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.

[2] Then I saw another angel ascend 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,

[3] saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God upon their foreheads."

A. The Four Angels are Restrained

In Jewish tradition God regulated the forces of nature through angels.

The four winds are agents of divine punishment. They represent a destructive, even demonic power that must be restrained by the angels [see the “restrainer” in 2 Thess 2:6-7] until the elect are sealed.

B. The Seal of God

The seal is a sign that these people belong to God and are under his power, authority, and protection. It is a mark of ownership and protection.

In the early Church this sealing was connected with Baptism. The Fathers of the Church saw this mark as symbolizing the character that baptism impresses on the soul.

Paul regularly speaks about being sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

However, here the seal is more than the seal of baptism. It is the special grace of perseverance and protection given to those called to martyrdom.

The “sealing of the saints” parallels Ez 9:1-7, where a messenger seals the foreheads of the righteous in Israel to protect them from the wrath of God poured out on Jerusalem.

The seal was shaped like the Hebrew letter *taw*, which means “mark” [Greek = *tau*]. In ancient Hebrew script *taw* looks like a cross [x or +].

They were sealed with the sign of the cross.

IV. THE NUMBER OF THE FAITHFUL

Read: Revelation 7:4-8

[4] And I heard the number of the sealed, a hundred and forty-four thousand sealed, out of every tribe of the sons of Israel,

[5] twelve thousand sealed out of the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand of the tribe of Reuben, twelve thousand of the tribe of Gad,

[6] twelve thousand of the tribe of Asher, twelve thousand of the tribe of Naphtali, twelve thousand of the tribe of Manasseh,

[7] twelve thousand of the tribe of Simeon, twelve thousand of the tribe of Levi, twelve thousand of the tribe of Issachar,

[8] twelve thousand of the tribe of Zebulun, twelve thousand of the tribe of Joseph, twelve thousand sealed out of the tribe of Benjamin.

A. 144,000 Sealed from the Tribes of Israel

So who are the 144,000? John tells us that they are from the twelve tribes of Israel.

Why 144,000? Because this number represents the “full number” of Israelites saved.

The number 144,000 [12 x 12 x 1000] is symbolic and suggests a faithful remnant from all the twelve tribes have been saved. It refers to a special group within the faithful, not all the faithful.

John seems to suggest that a faithful remnant of each of the twelve tribes of Israel is restored in the Church, under the twelve apostles.

So the 144,000 are probably Jews converted to Christianity [but there are many interpretations]. A righteous remnant from all the twelve tribes has been saved – even from the so-called “Ten Lost Tribes” of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

See commentary on pages 107-111 by Michael Barber in *Coming Soon*.

B. Jehovah Witnesses

Jehovah Witnesses say the 144,000 are special members of their group who will make it to heaven. The rest, the great multitude spoken of in Rev 7:9, will live on earth.

C. The Two Visions

The 144,000 are included in the second vision of great multitude. The crowd that is sealed in Rev 7:4-8 before the tribulation, is part of the crowd portrayed in their anticipated glory after the tribulation [Rev7:9-17].

Thus the vision in 7:9-17 takes in the entire Church, whereas the vision in 7:1-8 refers to only part of the Church.

D. The List of Tribes

Two things stand out in the list of the twelve tribes given here [see Gen 29].

1. Judah [the fourth son of Jacob] is listed first, thus supplanting Reuben, who was the eldest son of Jacob. Judah is put first because the Messiah came from that tribe.
2. The tribe of Dan is missing. Dan may have been excluded from the list presumably because it fell into idolatry [Judges 16:18-19], and eventually disappeared. Others suggest that John is following an ancient tradition that held that the Antichrist would come from Dan.

V. THE GREAT MULTITUDE

Read: Revelation 7:9-17

[9] After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,

[10] and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!"

[11] And all the angels stood round the throne and round the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,

[12] saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen."

[13] Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and whence have they come?"

[14] I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "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.

[15] Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night within his temple; and he who sits upon the throne will shelter them with his presence.

[16] They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.

[17] 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."

A. The Glory of the Saints

The great multitude represents all the saved, not just the martyrs – Jews and Gentiles alike – who have passed through the great tribulation without compromising their faith.

B. Palm Branches

Palm branches were often used in the Old Testament to celebrate the restoration of the temple. Here in Revelation the saints are celebrating their entry into the true temple of heaven.

Palm branches are also symbols of victory and joy after war.

C. The Number of the Saved

This uncountable multitude represents the spiritual offspring of Abraham – those who imitated him in faith [Rom 4:11-17].

- The Lord had promised to make Abraham the father of many nations [Gen 17:5], and to give him descendants too numerous to count [Gen 15:15].

D. White Robes

White robes stand for purity and victory - the garments of the faithful who endured the purifying fire of the great tribulation. John is probably speaking of the great tribulation of which Jesus foretold, but it can also refer to other tribulations:

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 [Mt 24:21].

E. The Great Tribulation

The great tribulation represents a time of unprecedented distress triggered by the opening of the seals.

As mentioned above, some commentators link this with the “great tribulation” that Jesus warned would engulf the Roman world in connection with the violent conquest of Jerusalem [Mt 24:21].

Other commentators link it with the persecutions of Christians near the end of the first century under the Roman Emperor Domitian.

The JBC links this to the Church’s ultimate tribulation before the Second Coming at the end of time [See CCC # 675, 676].

CCC - The Church's Ultimate Trial

675 Before Christ's second coming the Church must pass through a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers.⁵⁷³ The persecution that accompanies her pilgrimage on earth⁵⁷⁴ will unveil the "mystery of iniquity" in the form of a religious deception offering men an apparent solution to their problems at the price of apostasy from the truth. the supreme religious deception is that of the Antichrist, a pseudo-messianism by which man glorifies himself in place of God and of his Messiah come in the flesh.⁵⁷⁵

676 The Antichrist's deception already begins to take shape in the world every time the claim is made to realize within history that messianic hope which can only be realized beyond history through the eschatological judgement. the Church has rejected even modified forms of this falsification of the kingdom to come under the name of millenarianism,⁵⁷⁶ especially the "intrinsically perverse" political form of a secular messianism.⁵⁷⁷

677 The Church will enter the glory of the kingdom only through this final Passover, when she will follow her Lord in his death and Resurrection.⁵⁷⁸ The kingdom will be fulfilled, then, not by a historic triumph of the Church through a progressive ascendancy, but only by God's victory over the final unleashing of evil, which will cause his Bride to come down from heaven.⁵⁷⁹ God's triumph over the revolt of evil will take the form of the Last Judgement after the final cosmic upheaval of this passing world.⁵⁸⁰

It may represent all of the above.

F. The Praise of God

"Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen."

The seven acclamations signify that God deserves the totality of praise from his creation.

There is no greater exercise in the life of devotion than to meditate on the praise of the angels and to make it our own.

G. The Divine Shepherd

[16] They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.

[17] 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."*

Here God is pictured as the Good Shepherd who shelters his people from hunger and thirst and scorching heat. He will wipe away every tear and lead us to springs of living water. These blessings correspond to Isaiah visions of the Messianic age.

In Revelation, Christ is the True Shepherd, who guides his people to “living water” [Baptism], and feeds them [the Eucharist].

As he nourishes our bodies so he comforts our hearts; without the presence and comfort of God the sorrows of life would be unbearable; and without the strength of God there are times in life when we could never go on.

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Preparation for Week # 9 – Revelation Chapter 8

Review

1. *The Apocalypse* – notes by Archbishop Collins (handout)
2. The Four Senses of Scripture (handout)

Read

1. *Revelation to St. John* – Ignatius Catholic Study Bible Chapter 8 – The Seventh Seal.
2. *Coming Soon: Chapter* – Trumpeting God’s Victory

Discuss

1. Multiple Choice Questions 1-6, and
2. Discussion/Study Questions 1- 4 at end of Chapter 8 of *Coming Soon*.