

All Things New: Sealed By the Living God
By Jason Huff
January 26, 2020
Excerpts from Exodus 28; John 6:22-27; Revelation 7

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Revelation 7. May God give us the ears to hear His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “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." 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. 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." 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!" 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. 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.””

Do you remember back in school when we used to take lunches with us? Some people brown-bagged it; others of us brought lunch often enough that we had our own lunchbox. And how was it that we kept our brown bag distinct from everybody else’s? We put our names on them. Lunchboxes, backpacks, notebooks, school books, coats, hats, gloves, boots...whether with a piece of masking tape or a Sharpie, everything you owned had your name on it. All of it got stored in a desk and a cubby that had your name on it. It also meant you couldn’t leave without all that stuff because someone would know if you left anything behind. That was also the one rule about finding something you wanted and not returning it to someone – did it have their name on it? If it didn’t, then finders keepers.

Turns out, having your name on something is a practice with a long and complicated history. In the ancient world, back 2000 years before Christ, it was common to believe that knowing someone's name gave you power over them. To make sure they took the commandment seriously not to take the Lord's name in vain, the Hebrews never pronounced the name for God they knew, which we pronounce (likely wrongly) Yahweh or Jehovah. They said "Adonai" instead. Scripture tells us that the Father gives His Son Jesus a name that only Jesus knows. Names mean a lot.

Today's passage is another one with plenty of things that could confuse us. Revelation is just going to get trickier and trickier as we walk through it. But today's passage is a message of grace and hope and promise. Today's passage tells us about the seal of the living God. We've talked about seals before, but today we're going to see what God's seal means for us, and why we can live in peace despite the troubles around us.

Now a few of you remember that last week, we saw the first six seals opened on the scroll given to Jesus, the Lamb of God. As each one was unsealed, major world-affecting events unfolded. The martyrs for Jesus got a word in about their justice. And then the sixth seal presented us with a monumental calamity, one that if we take it literally really does spell the end of the world. While it may have been fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem or the sacking of the Roman Empire, it also points towards the end of time and the final tribulation on the earth. Revelation 6 ended with a big question: "The great day of wrath has come, and who can stand?"

That question is where we start today. John's vision continues as angels engage in the unfolding events on earth. Things are so catastrophic that even the winds around the earth have subsided. An angel comes with the seal of the living God. And he tells the angels that have charge over the disaster, "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." There are some who are going to make it through this great tribulation without true harm. In fact, some *will* stand.

Then John reveals those who are sealed: "144,000 from all the tribes of Israel." This number and the count of the 12 tribes has stymied interpreters. Some get it really, *really* wrong. The Jehovah's Witnesses cult was based around a central belief that the world was going to end in 1914. They thought their job was to recruit 144,000 Jehovah's Witnesses for the Scripture to be fulfilled. It was really difficult for them in a good way (I guess) when they got over 144,000 followers and had to figure out a theology about everybody else. It was really difficult for them in a bad way when 1914 came and went and no Jesus. They kept changing their numbers, and yet, still no Armageddon. It's amazing that people still listen to them, but it's a strange world.

Still, what are *we* to do with this number? Does it mean that in the end times, a group of the physical descendants of Abraham will become Jesus-followers? That's one possible interpretation, though very unlikely. The reality is, God absolutely loves the Jews. They are from the line of Abraham, which He made great promises to and has kept. I believe that God still has plans for Jews to come to know Jesus as Savior and Lord, and that is happening even now. God has not abandoned the bloodline of Abraham. As we heard in the readings from Exodus this morning, God had the names of the tribes of Israel written on the breastplate of the high priest. He will not forget them. But I don't think this number is about that.

Here's why. First, we remember that Scripture teaches us in Galatians 3 that the true Israel, the true people of Abraham, are those who believe and trust in God. Not everyone born Jewish is a member of Abraham's spiritual heritage, but those from every tribe and every nation that put their faith in God's promises and in His Son.

Second, the list of the twelve tribes is odd, different from other listings. The first tribe listed is Judah. Now Judah was not the first son of Jacob. It was Judah's descendants who became important, who followed God more faithfully than the northern tribes, and who were spared the brunt of God's judgment. King David and his descendant Jesus were from the tribe of Judah. Judah gets named first.

In the same way, the tribe of Dan is missing, replaced by one of the half-tribes of Joseph. Why is that? Again, this list shows deep spiritual awareness. Of all the tribes, Dan was the one far and away known for its reckless and constant idolatry. They were the first to commit idolatry as a tribe, and their idolatry continued all the way until they were exiled from the land. The list commends the faithful and removes the unfaithful.

But finally, the greatest difficulty of this list is that nine of the twelve tribes listed were long gone even in the time when Revelation was written. When the northern kingdom of Israel was exiled in 722 BC, it was thorough. Some people eventually came back and intermarried with the people who lived there during the intervening time, and those became the Samaritans. But other than Judah, Benjamin, and Levi, these tribes were all but gone. Now God can do anything, but we can't even be certain that people from these parts of Israel still exist to the present day. There are less than 1,000 Samaritans left today.

So where do the 144,000 come from? I believe this number represents the whole of all who will be saved out of the great tribulation, not a literal number. First, we've already seen the 24 elders back in chapter 4, 12 representing the tribes of Israel and 12 representing the disciples and the new believers coming after Jesus. 12 times 12 is 144. Take that times a thousand, and you have a numeric representation of the total number of people saved out of the tribulation.

The other reason I believe that to be true is that immediately after we are presented with the 144,000, John looks and sees a multitude from every place, every people group, so large that no one can count them. All of them belong to Jesus. All of them are wearing the white robes of Jesus' purity bought for them through His sacrifice on the cross. All of them are worshipping the Father and the Son, hailing them with palm branches. I believe this great multitude are the figurative 144,000, the true Israel, the faithful believers in God. I believe it may refer to all of us, since all of us in some sense have come through the tribulation of this world.

These are the ones who are sealed with God's seal. The seal doesn't mean that they can come to no earthly physical harm, but the tribulation doesn't occur until they are sealed with God's seal. The seal marks these believers as belonging to God. In fact, looking forward to Revelation 14:1, we find out that the seal on the believers is the name of Jesus and the name of the Father. While some may die in the great tribulation, none of them loses faith. They are marked with God's name and cannot come to spiritual harm. They are protected.

Now this great multitude, the people from every people group, the true Israel, they join in the worship in the heavenly throne room. And then, just kinda outta nowhere, an elder asks John, "These in white robes – who are they, and where did they come from?" Now John's a smart guy, smart enough to know when someone much wiser than he is trying to tell him something. He answers, You know."

The elder then makes some things clear. This great multitude has come out of the great tribulation. Their robes are white because they've been cleaned by Jesus, by His sacrifice for their sins. And the elder lists all the benefits for them. They will serve as priests, the greatest honor we can have. God spreads His tent over them, meaning that He extends His care and protection and blessings over them.

They will not hunger or thirst; they will not suffer from the heat they knew so well because the Lamb of God will shepherd us to living water. Sorrow will be gone. These promises are echoed again in Revelation 21, but we hear them now for the first time. It's good that we hear these promises now, because the story to come will tell us of the fierce persecution and hardship believers will go through in the last days.

So while some days may feel like the great tribulation, most days aren't. What is this passage reminding us about, teaching us for today, preparing us with for tomorrow? Let's look at some of the core ideas of the passage and how they influence our here and now.

First, let's look at the seal and what it means. Here's the idea in a nutshell: *we who believe and remain faithful to the end are sealed with the name of our God now and forever.* This is one of the most important things we can know. We are sealed to God. We are His. We belong to Him. And that means He's not going to let us go. Just like those lunchboxes in fifth grade, we have God's name on us. And here's the thing – if He were to let us go, we'd still have our name on us. It would prove God's promises untrue. And so when we are sealed to God, it's in permanent marker. It's binding.

I think this is incredibly reassuring when we realize our own difficulties and spiritual poverty. Because many Christians are wracked by the question, "Am I truly saved?" I believe, but I've sinned after becoming a believer, serious sins. Am I truly saved? I struggle with so many issues...am I truly saved? I have doubts and am not always sure of how strong my faith really is, or how strong it would be under trial...am I truly saved? I don't tithe like I should, I don't read my Bible often, I'd prefer to stay home and watch Netflix rather than go to Bible study...am I truly saved?

Here's the thing...if our salvation were on us, if we had anything to do with our salvation other than exercising the faith God has given us, we'd been doomed. But it's not on us. Salvation is not about what we must do but about what God has already done. God has claimed us. Before the great tribulation starts, when events are so bad that even the faithful would seem to be vulnerable, God seals us so that we will stand firm.

Now it doesn't mean that we don't want to shore up our faith, to make it as rock steady as we can. As believers, we want to confess our sins and get right with God. We want to learn more so that our doubts don't plague us. But we do not need to live in fear. We live in trust that God has saved us and claimed us and sealed us to Himself forever.

God has given us two sacraments that we practice because we believe that God works His grace in us through them and seals Himself to us through them. When we are baptized as an adult, we are obeying Jesus' command to be baptized as a symbolic washing away of our old self with its sins, drowning that self, and emerging anew. When we are baptized as children, our families are claiming that promise for us and promising to raise us so that one day, we will confirm our baptism and trust in Jesus with all our hearts.

Baptism is a sign and a seal for a believer. Communion is, too – we believe that Jesus is spiritually present in the elements and gives us His new life through the taking of the bread and the cup as a further sealing. You can ignore or discard the seal; you can say, "I don't believe" or live in a way that shows you don't. But everyone who is genuinely sealed to God will be preserved in their faith for eternity.

So when the chips are down and everything is going wrong, when your faith wavers and doubts creep in, do not fear. Just believe. You are sealed to God. He is not going to abandon or forsake you, ever. No matter what happens in this life, even though you are not protected from earthly calamities, even death, you are sealed for eternal life, and that's what matters.

Here's the second big thing: *being sealed to God seals you to His promises too*. Those who have come out of the great tribulation have great promises. They serve before God; they have no needs, they are covered by God's own tent and given His shelter. They are shepherded by the Good Shepherd and led to streams of living water. God will wipe away every tear. It's not just paradise; it's paradise with our awesome, giving God at its center, at its core.

When you are joined to Christ by faith and baptism, when you come to believe and turn your life over to God, these promises are for you too. We want to love God because He is God and should be worshipped, but we also love Him for what He has done and will do on our behalf. Scripture tells us in Psalm 103, "Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits – who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion." Our faith has benefits in the present and the future both. We don't wrestle with sin and give sacrificially of ourselves and attempt to live for Christ with no hope of a future reward. It's not selfish to think of that reward. God has promised it to all who persevere in faith.

And so really, what we must do is look to the one phrase that describes what the multitudes in white robes have done. The elder tells us, "they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." The one thing that unites the faithful is that they have turned to Christ. They are found guiltless and declared pure because they are no longer clothed in their own filthy rags of unrighteousness but the righteousness of Christ. They are dressed in the purity that comes from Jesus, from His pure life.

That is ultimately the final question for us today. Are we still relying on our own goodness to save us? Or have we humbled ourselves and asked God for His forgiveness and mercy? Have we asked God to take our old lives and get rid of them and to make us new in Jesus? Do we want the purity of Christ to be ours? It can be ours through faith in Jesus. The seal and the promises are ours; we have been sealed by the living God and promised eternal life. Will we act in faith and claim them?