

CHAPTER 7

“WHO SHALL BE ABLE TO STAND?”

Chapter 7 answers the question asked in 6:17: “For the great day of his wrath is come and who shall be able to stand?” Those who stand are identified as the 144,000 sealed of the twelve tribes of Israel. Verse 3 explains that these 144,000 are the servants of God. This identifies them as Christians. They are also described as a great multitude, standing before the throne of God, clothed in white robes. Verse 14 says that their robes were made white by the blood of the Lamb. This also shows that these people are Christians. This leads to the conclusion that the 144,000 and the great multitude clothed in white robes both represent the same people--- Christians. Christians are those who are sealed by God and have their sins forgiven by the blood of the Lamb. They will be able to “stand” in the day of judgment.

We should not view this chapter as a chronological order of events taking place between the sixth and seventh seals. Neither is it “an interlude” between these two seals, as some claim. It is taking place on this earth today! The servants of God are being “sealed” (v.3) and are washing their robes white in the blood of the Lamb (v. 14) all during this Christian dispensation. The first three verses of this chapter show that God is prohibiting the final events of the sixth seal until the events of chapter 7 are fulfilled.

Verse 1. And after these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, nor on the sea, nor on any tree.

The use of the number “4” is quite evident in this verse. There are four angels, standing on the four corners of the earth, restraining the four winds. The number “4” is used in association with the physical things of this earth. Therefore, this is a figurative description of God delaying the destruction of this earth, which was described in the sixth seal. God will not allow this earth to be destroyed until certain things described in chapter 7 take place. Verse 3 states exactly what must take place before this earth will be destroyed; the servants of God must be sealed.

It is also possible that the terms “earth,” “sea,” and “trees” are figurative. In Ps. 1:3, a tree is used to represent people. Therefore, it is possible that these terms are used to represent certain groups of people. It actually makes no difference whether these terms are figurative or literal in the overall interpretation of this chapter because, when Christ returns, the earth, as well as all those living upon it, will be affected.

Verse 2. And I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God: and he cried with a loud voice to the four angels, to whom it was given to hurt the earth and the sea,

John saw another angel ascending from the east or “sun-rising” as the ASV translates it. Many commentators believe he came from the east because this is the direction from which the sun rises to give light unto the world, but anything definite on this symbolism would be impossible to prove.

The important concept in this passage is that this angel, a messenger from God, carries the seal of the living God, and his duty is to seal the servants of God in their foreheads (v. 3). This shows that the events of this chapter are taking place during this present Christian dispensation because Christians are being sealed today. In Eph. 1:13, Paul told the Ephesians, “After that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise.” They had believed and were sealed. When we believe and obey the gospel today, we are sealed by that same Holy Spirit. To be sealed is to show that we belong to God. Throughout the ages, kings have used seals or signets as stamps or symbols of their authority. When we obey the gospel, we receive the seal of God in our foreheads. This is a figurative representation showing that we belong to God. We obviously do not receive a literal seal in our foreheads. This seal is symbolically placed in the Christian’s

forehead to show that he gives his mind, thoughts, and allegiance to the one and only living God.

Verse 3. Saying, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads.

This angel, carrying the seal of God, told the four angels of verse 1 not to destroy the earth until the servants of God had been sealed. God will not destroy this world, or let it be destroyed, until all those people who desire to obey the gospel have done so. This verse seems to be saying that God will not destroy this world as long as there are people who render obedience to the gospel. This concept is also present in other passages in Revelation. (See 6:11; 18:2; 20:7-9.)

We can rest assured that this earth will never be totally destroyed by man. It will exist until all the servants of God have been sealed and Christ has returned to take his faithful home. Then God will destroy it forever.

THE 144,000 SEALED

Verse 4. And I heard the number of them which were sealed: and there were sealed an hundred and forty and four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel.

The number of people who received this seal of God in their foreheads was 144,000. A great deal of confusion and controversy exist in the religious world today concerning this number. Some believe that only 144,000 people will be able to enter heaven, but, as we know, this is completely contrary to the teachings of the New Testament. This number should be viewed as a symbolic descriptive number, just as in the case with most of the numbers in Revelation.

As we study this verse, let us look first at what is meant by “all the tribes of the children of Israel.” In verses 5 through 8, there is a listing of the twelve tribes, and twelve thousand are sealed from each one. The first thing we notice about these twelve tribes is that they are not the actual twelve tribes of Israel. For instance, there was no tribe of Joseph. (Comments concerning this are made in vv. 5-8.) Because of this, we can be sure that these 144,000 people do not come from the actual twelve tribes of the Old Testament. This shows that these twelve tribes of Israel are symbolic rather than literal.

Many times the symbols in Revelation can be understood by comparing the spiritual kingdom of the New Testament with the physical kingdom of the Old Testament. The spiritual kingdom, the church, is a likeness to the physical kingdom of Israel. The twelve tribes of Israel were God’s chosen people under the law of Moses, just as the church is the chosen people of God today. The phrase “twelve tribes of Israel” is used to symbolically represent the entire church of God. It represents all those people who have ever lived upon this earth and have been faithful to God’s commands. Christ’s death on the cross was a sacrifice for the sins of all men who obey his will. He died for the forgiveness of sins of those under the old law, as well as those of us under the new law. (See 1kb. 9:15-17). All who have their sins forgiven are in the church of God and are a part of the 144,000.

The concept that the twelve tribes of Israel are symbolic of the church is evident in other passages in the New Testament also. In Jas. 1:1, James addresses his epistle to the “twelve tribes,” which must refer to Christians, since the actual twelve tribes no longer existed. Also, in Gal. 6:16, the church is referred to as the “Israel of God.” (For additional information, see comments on 2:9.)

Since the “twelve tribes” represent all people who are faithful to God, the number 144,000 is symbolic of the saved of all ages. This is exactly what we are told in 14:1-4. It states that the 144,000 are the “redeemed from the earth.” The 144,000 are those who follow Christ. and will “be able to stand” in that last day, when all others will attempt to hide. The 144,000 are all those people whom God has sealed, or will seal, by the time Christ returns. From the discussion of verse 2, we know that God seals those who are obedient to his will.

The number “144,000” is consistent with the use of numbers as outlined in the introduction of this book. The number “12” is used to represent organized religion. The number “1,000” stands for completeness. From each of the 12 tribes, 12,000 are sealed which indicates the complete

number of those who have obeyed God. If we multiply 12,000 by 12 for the number of tribes, the product is 144,000. This represents all the saved of all ages.

One interrelationship in Revelation should be mentioned concerning the 144,000. In 21:17, the measurement of the wall of the holy city is given. It measures 144 cubits. The wall represents the law of God which man must obey in order to enter into this holy city, the church. The wall measures 144 cubits, and the people inside this wall are the 144,000, or the saved of all ages. Those who obey the gospel pass through the 144-cubit wall and become a part of the 144,000.

Verses 5-8. Of the tribe of Juda were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Reuben were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Gad were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Aser were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Nephthallm were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Manasses were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Simeon were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Levi were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Issachar were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Zabulon were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Joseph were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Benjamin were sealed twelve thousand.

These four verses list the twelve tribes of Israel, and twelve thousand are sealed from each of them making a total of 144,000. As discussed before, the tribes named here are not the actual twelve tribes of Israel that received portions of the promised land. The tribes of Dan and Ephraim are omitted, and the tribes of Joseph and Levi are added. If these were the literal twelve tribes of Israel, there would be no one saved in the tribes of Dan and Ephraim and those in the tribes of Joseph and Manasses would be included twice. This forces the conclusion that the twelve tribes listed here are not the literal twelve tribes of Israel. They represent all of God's chosen people.

The question then arises: Why are these twelve tribes named individually? Coffman quotes Beckwith as saying, "Nineteen different arrangements of these names are found in the Old Testament, with none of which does this list agree."¹ This must be done in order to help us make a correct interpretation of this passage. If these twelve tribes were not named, we would immediately assume the "tribes of the children of Israel," spoken of in verse 4, were referring to the literal tribes of Israel. We would have no reason to consider this a figurative representation of all God's people.

One other interesting fact is that the tribe of Judah is listed first, instead of Reuben, Jacob's firstborn. In most cases the firstborn will be named first, but since Judah was the tribe from which the Messiah came, it is placed first in this list.

THE VICTORIOUS MULTITUDE: SERVANTS OF GOD

Verse 9. After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands;

"After this" indicates the beginning of a different vision. Therefore, some of the symbols in this part of the chapter may refer to the same things as the symbols used in the first part. For example, in this verse, the great multitude refers to all the children of God, just as the number "144,000" did in verse 4.

The great multitude, which no one could number of all different peoples, was clothed in white. Rev. 19:8 defines fine linen, "clean and white," as the symbol used to describe the church, or Christians. Therefore, the multitude, standing before the throne, must be Christians. Since Eph. 1:13 defines those whom God seals as Christians, then both symbols, the 144,000 and the great multitude, refer to the same group of people— Christians. These Christians clothed in white, the symbol of purity and holiness, are standing before the throne which indicates they are in the presence of God. As Christians today, we are figuratively standing before the throne of God serving him day and night in his temple (v. 15).

People of all nations and tongues serve God in his temple (church) today. This is in contrast to the old law of Moses which required only the children of Israel to be subject to those laws.

This great multitude of people held palms in their hands. According to Cruden's concordance the palm tree "is the usual emblem of constancy, fruitfulness, patience and victory; which the more it is oppressed, the more it flourisheth; the higher it grows, the stronger and broader it is in the top."² Every Christian should strive to gain these attributes. Overcoming the trials and persecutions of this life should serve to strengthen our faith in the Lord.

Palm branches were also spread before our Savior as he entered Jerusalem, indicating those people's willingness to serve him. (See Jn. 12:13; Mk. 11:8.)

As members of the Lord's church today, we figuratively stand before the throne of God dressed in white robes with palms in our hands. The white robes indicate the sinless state we are in because of Christ's sacrifice, and palms represent our willingness to serve him.

Verse 10. And cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb.

This great multitude, representing all Christians, cry with a loud voice as they praise God and Christ for the salvation they have provided. This should be the cry of all Christians today. We must thank God and praise him continually for the salvation that he has made available to all men who are willing to obey him.

Verse 11. And all the angels stood round about the throne, and about the elders and the four beasts, and fell before the throne on their faces, and worshipped God,

God is the one and only true and living God and is worthy to be worshiped by every being that exists. The angels worship God indicating that all heavenly beings owe their allegiance to him. The elders, referring to the twenty-four elders around the throne as described in chapter 4, are worshipping God. Since they represent the spiritual lawgivers of God, this shows that all man's spiritual worship must be directed to God in accordance with those laws that he has given.

The four beasts, or living creatures, which represent the physical things of man, are also worshipping God. This shows that our physical lives should be devoted to the service of God. All mankind, and even the heavenly beings, must continually direct all their spiritual worship and physical activities toward serving the one and only God of heaven.

Verse 12. Saying, Amen: Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen.

As might be expected, these angels, elders, and living creatures were praising God in seven ways. It is probably no coincidence that "7" is the divine complete number.

God is complete, and all of our worship should be directed to him.

Verse 13. And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they?

This elder must have been one of the twenty-four elders seated around the throne in 4:4. It may be significant that one of these elders asks these questions of John, because the twenty-four elders are representative of the spiritual laws of God, and this great multitude represents all those people who have been obedient to those laws.

This elder asks John two questions to which he obviously knows the answer because he answers them in the next verse. It also seems likely that John also knew the answer to these two questions because, according to the next verse, he was confident the elder knew the answers. The inference is, if John knew the answers, then certainly the elder knew.

Verse 14. And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

There is much discussion in the religious world today concerning this verse and specifically what is meant by great tribulation. Many teach that immediately prior to the second coming of Christ, there will be a seven-year period of great tribulation in which the "Antichrist" will control the world. This is completely contrary to the teachings of the New Testament. Therefore, we

must look for the biblical meaning of “great tribulation.”

This verse identifies those people who come out of great tribulation as those who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. They are Christians.

One important concept in understanding this passage, as well as several other passages in Revelation, is knowing exactly when we make our robes white. White is symbolic of purity or holiness. Our robes, garments, are symbolic of the type of lives we are leading here on this earth. When we wash our robes and make them white in the blood of the Lamb, we put on the white robes of righteousness. (See 19:8.) If our robes are not white, we are living in a state of sin and following the ways of the devil. In Acts 22:16, Saul was told to be baptized in order to wash away his sins. When we obey the gospel through baptism, our sins are washed away, and our robes are made white by the blood of the Lamb. We are then living in a state of righteousness in the sight of God. This does not mean that we can never again commit sin. It means that as long as we are faithful to God, we have those sins forgiven. We know this to be true because, according to 3:4, there were some in the church at Sardis who had defiled their garments. They had gone back to the ways of sin after having their garments made white by the blood of the Lamb. (For additional comments on the white robes, see 3:4, 5, 18; 6:11; 19:8.)

Knowing that Christians come out of great tribulation when they wash their robes and make them white in the blood of the Lamb enables us to determine the meaning of the period of great tribulation. It is the place of spiritual bondage of sin in which all sinners find themselves before they obey the gospel of Christ. This symbolism is a parallel to the likeness of Moses delivering the children of Israel from physical bondage. Just as Moses, who is the likeness of Christ, delivered the Israelites from physical bondage in Egypt, Christ delivers mankind from the spiritual bondage of sin. Moses led his people across the Red Sea, and Christ leads mankind out of the bondage of sin through the red sea of his blood. This situation was prophesied in Isa. 61:1b which states, “he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.” In Luke 4:17-19, Jesus reads this passage from the prophet Esaias to show that it was written as a prophecy concerning himself. Verse 21 of Luke chapter 4 confirms that Christ fulfilled this prophecy.

Those who are outside of Christ are in the greatest bondage known to man. They are the slaves of sin and the devil. The Israelites were in great physical tribulation as slaves to the Egyptians. Sinners are in great spiritual tribulation as they are enslaved by the devil. For more information on this subject, please refer to the illustration in the section titled “Suggestions for Studying Revelation” at the beginning of this book.

The actual translation of this verse is, these are they which “are coming” out of great tribulation. This wording agrees perfectly with this interpretation of the great tribulation. As people continue to be obedient to the law of Christ, they are coming out of great spiritual tribulation, washing their robes and making them white in the blood of the Lamb, and being added to the church of our Lord.

Verse 15. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them.

Because these people have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple. The temple of God in the New Testament is his church. We read in 1 Cor. 3:16, “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God.” If God’s people are his temple, then, certainly, they make up his church. (See Eph. 2:21.) As Christians, we are constantly serving God day and night in his temple.

As God sits on his throne, he also dwells among his people today. Mt. 18:20 says “where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them.” In 2 Cor. 6:16, we read, “Ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” God is dwelling with his church today. (Also see comments on 21:3.)

As Christians we must understand that we are under a much better covenant than those who were under the law of Moses. We are under that “perfect law of liberty” (Jas. 1:25). Because Christ died for our sins, we dwell with God as he dwells with us. We have direct access to his

throne through our prayers. Heb. 4:16 says, "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace." The people under the law of Moses did not have this privilege. In this respect, we are standing before the throne of God serving him day and night in his temple, the church.

Verse 16. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat.

Because of the language of this verse and also verse 17, most people interpret the events of this vision as taking place in heaven. But, we must remember we are dealing with figurative language. It is not the intent of these verses to describe our literal situation in heaven, but rather our spiritual situation in God's church.

As Christians we shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore. This means we will no longer hunger or thirst after righteousness. In Mt. 5:6, our Lord said, "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled." The Israelites, under the law of Moses, hungered and thirsted for righteousness which could not be acquired under that law. Righteousness came with the law of Christ. Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness today can be filled by obeying the gospel and becoming a member of the Lord's church.

Language very similar to these verses was used by Isaiah to prophesy the coming of the church. Is. 49:10 states, "They shall not hunger nor thirst; neither shall the heat nor sun smite them: for he that hath mercy on them shall lead them, even by the springs of water shall he guide them." Christ established his church, and those in it do not hunger and thirst for righteousness. We have it because Christ died for our sins.

Christians also have a shelter from the heat and sun. This symbolism is also used in Is. 49:10 to prophesy the coming of the church. Another similar passage is Is. 4:6: "And there shall be a tabernacle for a shadow in the daytime from the heat, and for a place of refuge, and for a covert from storm and from rain. The church is a place of refuge from the sins of this world. As long as we are faithful members of the Lord's church, heat of the sins of this world cannot harm us because our sins are forgiven.

Verse 17. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.

As members of the Lord's church today, the Lamb (Christ), who is in the midst of the throne, will feed us. The church is being fed by Christ today through his Word. This idea is also expressed in other passages in Revelation. Rev. 2:17 states, "To him that overcometh (Christians), will I give to eat of the hidden manna." Just as the Israelites were fed literal manna from heaven to sustain their physical lives, Christians are fed spiritual manna from heaven to sustain their spiritual lives. In chapter 12, the church is symbolically described as a woman clothed with the sun (v. 1), and verse 6 says, "And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, that they should feed her there a thousand two hundred and threescore days." The church is fed and sustained on spiritual food from God today which is his Word.

Christ will also lead us unto living fountains of waters. Water is a substance necessary to sustain one's physical life. These living fountains of waters are waters that will sustain our spiritual lives for all eternity. We must partake of them here on this earth in order to enter into that eternal abode. This spiritual water is the gospel of Christ. Rev. 22:17 says, "And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely." When one obeys the gospel today, he is partaking of this fountain of living waters. It is available to all men who are willing to come and partake of it through their obedience to the gospel. (For more information on this water of life, see comments on 22:1.)

We are also told that God will wipe away all tears from our eyes. The question that must be answered is: When does this occur? Most people interpret this as taking place in heaven, and no doubt this will be true of heaven, but the point which is missed is that it also takes place spiritually in the church today. There are at least four passages in Isaiah which use wording similar to this statement to prophesy the coming of the church. They are Is. 25:8, 30:19, 35:10,

and 60:20. In each of these, the coming of the church is described as a time when God's people shall have their tears or sorrows taken away. For our purposes here, we will discuss Is. 25:8. It reads, "He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces." We know this is a prophecy of the church because Is. 25:7 states that this will be the time when "he will destroy... the face of the covering cast over all people." Second Cor. 3:14-16 specifies when this covering or veil was removed. It was removed when Christ established his new law. This covering over the face of the people was removed at the same time God wiped away the tears from off their faces. Therefore, God wiped away tears when he established the new law.

We obviously still have the sorrows and physical tears of this life; then what were these tears which he wiped away? They were the tears of our spiritual life. Under the old law, forgiveness of sins was not attainable. Their sins were remembered again every year (Heb. 10:3). When Christ came, he did away with that old law and established a new one which made forgiveness of our sins possible. He gave us salvation. He wiped the spiritual tears from our eyes. This is exactly what is stated in Is. 25:9. Speaking of the day when God would wipe away tears, Isaiah said, "And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the Lord; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation." The tears have been wiped away, and we rejoice in his salvation. There are no more tears of unforgiven sin to those who are faithful members of the Lord's church. We have forgiveness of sin.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

There are two major symbols in this chapter which explain a great deal about what it means to be a Christian. The 144,000 represent all those who have been sealed by God, showing that we belong to him and are a part of the redeemed. The great multitude, standing before the throne of God in white robes, is a vision of God's people as they serve him in the church today. It is our sincere hope that this interpretation will serve to enhance our understanding of what it means to be a Christian. "There is nothing on this earth as important as being a member of the Lord's church. When we obey the gospel, our robes are washed and made white by the blood of the Lamb. We enter into God's temple where we serve him day and night. We no longer hunger and thirst after righteousness because we are filled. We have obtained the righteousness which is in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 5:2 1). We have a place of refuge from the sins of this world, and we partake of the living waters of life. God also wipes the tears of spiritual sorrow from our eyes, and we are able to rejoice because of the salvation we have in Christ.

Since many people apply these symbols to heaven, we might also add that heaven will surely have these qualities because the church is made up of those who will be taken to heaven. Therefore, there is nothing wrong with applying these things to heaven, but we must be sure not to miss the message intended that is directed to the church.

¹James Burton Coffman, *Commentary on Revelation* (Austin, Tex.: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1979), pp. 164-65. As quoted from Ison T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1919), p. 542.

²Alexander Cruden, *Unabridged Concordance* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1968), p. 348.