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Sermon Summary #18

The Servants of God: Sealed and Safe Revelation 7:1-17; 14:1-5

As you know, here at Bridgeway we love to sing the song, *King of My Heart*. The way in which it declares that God is good is both biblical and reassuring. But there is a line in the chorus that often times sticks in the throat of some believers. It goes something like this: “You’re never gonna’ let, never gonna’ let me down.” Some of you struggle to sing this because deep down inside *you don’t really believe it*. You think there have been times in your life when God really did let you down, and you are afraid there may well be more instances in the future when he’ll do it again.

When people have asked me about this line in the song and what it means I always direct their attention to Romans 8:28 where we are assured that “for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” In other words, God never lets us down because he takes even the worst of tragedies and setbacks and turns them for good in our lives. He mysteriously and mercifully uses them to change us more and more into the image of Jesus.

There is yet another sense in which God never lets us down. *He never fails to fulfill his promises*. But the problem with this is that we all too often think God has promised to do something for us that in point of fact is nowhere stated in Scripture.

Perhaps the best and most common example of this is physical suffering and persecution from our enemies. When we endure pain and suffering and opposition and unjust treatment at the hands of the world, we immediately jump to the conclusion that God has quite obviously “let us down” by not protecting us from such attacks. But *God never in Scripture promises that his children will be insulated against or protected from the devastating consequences of physical harm or persecution or natural calamities*. Never. To suggest, then, that when you are fired from your job for no reason that God has let you down is to misunderstand what he does and does not promise us in the Bible. When you suffer financial hardship because of the immoral behavior of someone else, or when you lose your house and possessions in a tornado or when you are slandered at work or are thrown in jail simply for being a Christian, this is no indication that God has failed you or has let you down or has not come through on a promise he made to you in the Bible.

This is critically important for us to understand if we are going to make sense of what we read in Revelation 7 and 14. Here in these two chapters we read of 144,000 individuals being “sealed” by God. Who are these people and what does it mean that they are “sealed”? Is this a promise that God will make certain they never suffer at the hands of the non-Christian world or from the attacks of Satan? If not, what does it mean and how does it apply to you and me? That’s where we’re going today. So let’s get started.

The Sealing of the Saints

Revelation 7 is a *parenthetical pause* in which John explains the vision of chapter six in more detail and provides a background against which it may be better understood. Thus, when he begins in verse one with the words, “After this,” he does *not* mean that the *events* of chapter seven are chronologically *subsequent* to or follow those of chapter six, but only that the *vision* of chapter seven *appeared* to him after the *vision* of chapter six. This is confirmed when we observe that the task of the four angels is to prevent any harm being done to “the earth” or “the sea” or “any tree” (7:1), until the servants of God can be sealed. Since the seal judgments of chapter six describe considerable, indeed catastrophic, harm to the earth, sea, and trees, *it seems best to understand chapter seven as descriptive of what occurred prior to the events of chapter six, not subsequent to them*.

Revelation 7:1-8 answers a question that everyone asks: “If the world is the object or focus of God’s wrath, as seen in the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments, how will Christians survive?” That’s a great question! Vv. 1-8 of chapter seven

explain how believers can persevere through these judgments, while vv. 9-17 provide us with a description of the heavenly rewards and blessings that will be theirs. There is a sense, then, in which Revelation 7 is the answer to the question posed at the close of Revelation 6. In 6:17, as the wrath of God falls on the unrepentant, they cry out, **“Who can stand?”** (6:17b). Revelation 7 gives the answer: **“Only those who are sealed and thus preserved from God’s wrath can stand and persevere.”**

Before we go any further let me remind you of something that I emphasized and explained at the start of Revelation 6. This book does not merely tell us what will happen in the future leading up to the Second Coming of Christ. It tells us what **has happened** in the past 19 centuries of the history of the church, and it tells us what **is happening** right now in our lives, in our own day, and it also tells us what **will happen** in the days and years ahead before Jesus returns. The book of Revelation portrays for us in highly symbolic and graphic imagery the course of events in all of church history, the conflict between good and evil, the battle between Christ and the enemies of his kingdom, spanning the time from the first coming of Jesus to the second coming of Jesus. So what we read in Revelation 7 isn’t only about the future. It’s also about what God has done in the past and is doing in the present for all his redeemed people.

Reference in 7:1 to the “four corners of the earth” and the “four winds of the earth” points to the cosmic nature of this vision: *four* being the number in Revelation that consistently symbolizes the entire earth and its inhabitants (see also Ezek. 37:9; Jer. 49:36; Dan. 7:2; 8:8; 11:4; Zech. 2:6; 6:5). The fact that the four winds must be held back or prevented from “harming” the earth indicates they are probably evil, wicked, rebellious angelic (demonic) agents whom God is using to bring judgment against the world (cf. Jer. 49:36).

In v. 2 John sees **“another angel”** who is portrayed as issuing a command to other angelic beings, perhaps pointing to a hierarchy within the angelic host. He has a divine and gracious commission: he comes with the “seal of the living God” designed to protect God’s people from the “seal” judgments that are imminent.

The purpose of this “seal” is **not** to protect believers from physical harm that comes either as a result of the “seal/trumpet/bowl” judgments or persecution or from the attacks of Satan. Let’s never forget that John has described himself as our “partner in . . . tribulation” (Rev. 1:9). And Jesus told the Christians in the church in Smyrna to “be faithful unto death” (Rev. 2:10) given the fact that they were about to “suffer” because “the devil is about to throw some” of them “into prison” (Rev. 2:10). You will also recall from what we saw in Revelation 6:9-11 that many had already been martyred for their faith and many more would follow. As far as I can tell, nowhere in the NT are the people of God ever promised protection from physical suffering at the hands of unbelievers or from the ravages of living in a fallen world. Certainly God often does providentially and mercifully protect his people, but there is no guarantee that he will always do so.

God nowhere says we are invulnerable to Satan’s attack, but he does promise us that nothing Satan or anyone else might do can ever separate us from the love he has for us in Jesus (Rom. 8:37-39). What we are reading about here is divine preservation and protection of a spiritual nature. ***It is God’s gracious provision of persevering faith in the midst of intense persecution and suffering. The seal strengthens our faith so that the trials through which we pass serve not to separate us from God but only to refine and purify our commitment to him.*** In other words, persecution and pain and suffering have the tendency to weaken an individual’s resistance. What safeguard or assurance do we have that when faced with this we won’t crater under pressure and deny Jesus? The safeguard is the seal of God imposed on the foreheads of God’s people. The verb “to seal” can also mean to authenticate and to designate ownership of something or someone. This is surely in view insofar as in 14:1 the seal is identified as the Name of the Lamb and the Father (cf. 22:4). Indeed, the “mark” of the beast on the forehead of his followers is identified as “the name of the beast” (14:9-11).

I am persuaded that the entire imagery of the “seal” is simply a reference to the **Holy Spirit** himself, whose abiding presence in Christians is likened unto “sealing” which marks them out as God’s and protects them from spiritual harm:

“And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee” (2 Cor. 1:21-22).

“In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory” (Eph. 1:13-14; cf. 4:30).

Thus, when we read in Revelation that God has “sealed” his people and put his name on their foreheads we should immediately think of *the gift of the Holy Spirit and his work in our hearts to mark us out as belonging to God and protected and preserved in faith no matter how much tribulation or suffering we face*. It’s God’s way of saying: “You’re mine! I will never let you go! I will sustain and preserve and uphold you in faith no matter what the enemy may attempt to do.”

By the way, this is the clearest indication that the so-called “mark of the Beast” is not a literal, physical mark on the bodies of unbelievers, either on their forehead or their right hand. All through Revelation we see Satan making every effort to copy whatever God does. So, for example, the three persons of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, find their evil counterpart in Satan, the Beast, and the False Prophet. Just as Jesus died and rose again from the dead, the Beast is portrayed as dying and rising to life again.

My point is simply that the so-called “mark” of the Beast that unbelievers receive on their forehead or their right hand is *a demonic rip-off, a depraved parody, a counterfeit imitation* of the “mark” that believers receive on their foreheads. Look at the texts where the people of God are “sealed” on their foreheads:

“Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads” (Rev. 7:3).

“They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads” (Rev. 9:4).

“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” (Rev. 14:1).

“They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads” (Rev. 22:4).

No one that I know of believes that all Christians will literally/physically have the name of Jesus and the name of the Father tattooed on their foreheads. This is simply a way of describing the fact that those who are redeemed by the blood of Christ belong to him and to his Father and are preserved in faith by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

So we later read that the False Prophet causes everyone who isn’t a Christian to have the mark of the Beast written on his/her forehead as a sign that they belong to the Beast and are loyal to him. This “mark” on their foreheads or on their right hand is simply *Satan’s way of mimicking the seal of God that is on the foreheads of God’s people*. If you have the name of Jesus and God the Father written on your forehead it simply means they own you, you belong to them, you are loyal to the Lord God Almighty. But if you have “the name of the beast” (Rev. 13:17) written on your forehead it signifies that *he* owns you, you belong to *him*, you are loyal to the Antichrist. My point is that if you don’t argue that the name of Jesus and God the Father is literally tattooed on the foreheads of Christians you have no reason to argue that the name of the Antichrist (or his number, 666) is literally tattooed on the foreheads of non-Christians.

Some have found the background for the “mark” of the beast in the Jewish practice of wearing *tephillim* or phylacteries. These were leather boxes containing Scripture passages (cf. Exod. 13:9,16; Deut. 6:8; 11:18; Mt. 23:5) that were worn either on the *left* arm (facing the heart) or the forehead. The mark of the beast, however, was to be placed on the *right* hand. Others have pointed out that the word “mark” was used of the emperor’s seal on business contracts and the impress of the Roman ruler’s head on coins. Perhaps, then, “the mark alludes to the state’s political and economic ‘stamp of approval,’ given only to those who go along with its religious demands” (Beale, 715).

Thus it seems quite clear that the “mark” of the beast on his followers is the demonic counterpart and parody of the “seal” that is placed on the foreheads of the people of God (see 7:3-8; 14:1; 22:4). “Just as the seal and the divine name on believers connote God’s ownership and spiritual protection of them, so the mark and Satanic name signify those who belong to the devil and will undergo perdition” (Beale, 716). Since the seal or name on the believer is obviously invisible, being symbolic of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, it seems certain that the mark of the beast is likewise a symbolic way of describing the loyalty of his followers and his ownership of them. If you’re wondering why the seal on God’s people and the mark on the non-Christian is placed on the forehead of each, it may

be that the forehead points to one's ideological commitment and the hand to the practical outworking or manifestation of that commitment.

The 144,000

The list of tribes here in Revelation 7 corresponds to none of the nearly twenty different variations found in the OT. Judah, listed first here, is found in that position in the OT only when the tribes are arranged geographically, moving from south to north (Num. 34:19; Josh. 21:4; Judges 1:2; 1 Chron. 12:24). The only exception to this is Numbers 2:3 (followed by 7:12; 10:14). Perhaps Judah's priority here "emphasizes the precedence of the messianic king from the tribe of Judah (cf. Gen. 49:10; 1 Chron. 5:1-2) and thus refers to a fulfillment of the prophecy in Gen. 49:8 that the eleven other tribes 'will bow down' to Judah" (Beale, 417).

One can hardly fail to note that *the tribes of Dan and Ephraim are omitted*. One tradition believed that the Antichrist was to come from the tribe of Dan (based on a misinterpretation of Jer. 8:16 and first found in Irenaeus, @ 200 a.d.). Dan was also closely associated with idol worship (Judg. 18:16-19; 1 Kings 12:28-30; cf. Gen. 49:17; Judges 18:30; Jer. 8:16), as was Ephraim (Hosea 4:17-14:8). In Revelation 7, Joseph and Manasseh substitute for Dan and Ephraim. In the final analysis, there is no clear reason for this and we may never know why.

Who are these **144,000** who receive the seal of the living God? I believe that they are actually representative of *all God's people, whether Jew or Gentile, who have put their trust in Jesus*.

First, there are several noticeable differences between the 144,000 in vv. 4-8 and the great multitude in vv. 9-17. Notice that the first group is specifically numbered (144,000) whereas the second is innumerable. Furthermore, the members of the 144,000 are all taken from but one nation, Israel, whereas those in the innumerable multitude are taken from "every nation and tribe and people and language" (7:9). Another difference is their location: the 144,000 appear to be on earth, whereas the multitude is in heaven, before the throne of God (7:9). Finally, the 144,000 are in imminent peril and thus require divine protection, whereas the multitude are in a condition of absolute peace and joy.

Do these differences mean that the two groups are entirely different, or is it *the same group viewed from different perspectives, at different stages of their existence and experience*? I believe it is the latter.

Second, these in 7:4-8 are surely identical with the *144,000* mentioned in Rev. 14:1-5. In both cases it is said that they received the seal of God on their "foreheads" (7:3 and 14:1). In 14:3 they are described as those who had been "redeemed from the earth" and again in 14:4 they were "redeemed from mankind". This echoes Revelation 5:9 where the Lamb is said to have "ransomed" or "redeemed" for God people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. This same phrase is used again in Revelation 7:9 to describe the innumerable multitude. This would seem to indicate that *the 144,000 = the innumerable multitude = the redeemed of all ages, and not some special remnant of humanity*.

Third, in Revelation 14:4 the 144,000 are described as "first fruits" (*aparche*) to God and to the Lamb. The idea would appear to be that the 144,000 were an initial group, perhaps a remnant, of believers whose salvation was a foreshadowing of a yet greater ingathering or harvest of believers in the end time. Thus the 144,000 represent the totality of God's redeemed *at that time*, and thus "first fruits" of the remainder of *all the redeemed* who will be gathered in the final harvest at the close of history.

Fourth, these 144,000 are called the "servants" (*douloi*) of God (7:3). Whenever the word "servants" is used in Revelation (2:20; 19:5; 22:3) it refers to *the entire community of the redeemed*. Also, if Satan puts a seal or mark on all his followers (13:16-17; 14:9-11), it seems reasonable that God would do likewise for all his people.

Fifth, if you're wondering why the 144,000 are numbered and the multitude is innumerable, it is probably because the numbering (144,000) is being used to evoke images of the OT census, which was designed to determine the military strength of the nation (see Num. 1:3, 18, 20; 26:2, 4; 1 Chron. 27:23; 2 Sam. 24:1-9). The point is that these in Revelation 7 constitute a *Messianic army* called upon, like Jesus himself, to conquer the enemy through sacrificial death. In the OT those counted were males of military age (twenty years and over). This explains why the 144,000 in Revelation 14:1-5 are *adult males*, i.e., those eligible for military service.

Sixth, this “military force” in 7:4-8 conquers its enemy in the same way that Jesus has conquered at the cross. When Jesus died it appeared that Satan had won. But in an ironic twist it was precisely by dying that Jesus gained the victory. Likewise, when God’s people die for their faith without renouncing Jesus they conquer the enemy.

In other words, *the people of God are portrayed as engaging in holy war, but in a spiritual, non-violent way*. John’s aim is to show that the decisive battle in God’s eschatological war against all evil has been won by the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus and by his followers who faithfully persevere in the face of death when they refuse to deny that Jesus is Lord. It may look like Satan has won, but the martyrs are the real victors. They conquer by dying in their faith, committed to the end to Jesus.

So, precisely who are the 144,000? Are they different from or one and the same with the innumerable multitude?

Most dispensational, pretribulational, premillennialists, that is, most who read the book in a futurist sense, understand the 144,000 to be a Jewish remnant saved immediately after the rapture of the Church. Many then argue that, in the absence of the Church, they serve as *evangelists* who preach the gospel during the Great Tribulation. In other words, these are literally 144,000 (arithmetically speaking, neither 143,999 nor 144,001) ethnic descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The innumerable multitude, some go on to argue, are Gentiles saved in the tribulation through the evangelistic efforts of the 144,000. Be it noted, however, that *there is nothing whatsoever said in this passage about these people functioning as evangelists or being responsible for the salvation of the multitude*.

My problem with this perspective begins with the fact that it depends entirely on a futurist interpretation of the book. Furthermore, why would God protect *only Jewish* believers and leave Gentile believers to endure such horrific judgments? And why would God protect *only 144,000* Jewish believers? Why would he not protect all of them? In Revelation 9:4 we read that only those with the seal of God on their foreheads are exempt from the demonic torments that are so horrible and agonizing that men will long to die. Is it feasible or consistent with the character of God that he would protect only a select group from such wrath while afflicting the rest of his blood-bought children with it? The answer is a resounding No. Therefore, the 144,000 who are sealed on their forehead in 7:4-8 (and 14: 9:4) must be *all* the redeemed, not a select few.

My understanding is that the number 144,000 is *symbolic* (as is the case with virtually every number in Revelation). “12” is both squared (the 12 tribes multiplied by the 12 apostles? Cf. 21:12, 14) and multiplied by a thousand, a two-fold way of emphasizing *completeness*. Hence, John has in view *all the redeemed, all believers, whether Jew or Gentile, i.e., the Church*.

Thus the 144,000 in Revelation 7:3-8 and 14:1-5 and the innumerable multitude in 7:9-17 refer to the same group of people viewed from differing perspectives. The 144,000 are the redeemed standing on the brink of battle while still on earth, while the innumerable multitude are the redeemed enjoying their heavenly reward. So again, the 144,000 and the innumerable multitude are the same. The 144,000 are portrayed as a Messianic army waging spiritual war while yet on earth while the multitude are the redeemed of all ages in heaven enjoying their reward in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ

[I need to briefly address an accusation that has come against me. Since I believe the 144,000 from the twelve tribes of Israel is a reference to the totality of the Church of Jesus Christ, a church comprised of both believing Jews and believing Gentiles, some have insisted that I embrace what is called “replacement” theology. Replacement theology argues that believing Gentiles who comprise the Church have replaced or perhaps even displaced Jews from ever inheriting the promises made to Abraham. But I do not believe that.

Listen to me carefully. No believing Jewish man or woman will ever be deprived of the inheritance that God promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The NT clearly teaches that Jews *who believe in Jesus* together with Gentiles *who believe in Jesus* together comprise the true Israel of God, the Church. They will together, equally, inherit all the promises. Believing Gentiles are described in the NT as being made members of the commonwealth of Israel (Eph. 2:11ff.) and of being grafted into the one olive tree alongside believing Jews (Romans 11).

What the NT has done is to expand the meaning of a true Jew. A true Jew, a true Israelite, is no longer someone who merely has the blood of Abraham coursing through his veins. A true Jew, a true seed of Abraham is the man or woman who is in Christ. It doesn’t matter if he/she is a Gentile or Jew. The only thing that matters is whether or not he/she is

in Christ by faith. And all who are in Christ by faith are heirs of the promises made to the patriarchs. No one is replaced. No one forfeits their inheritance. Thus the relationship between Israel and the Church isn't one of replacement but of fulfillment. Let me simply ask you this question: ***“Does the butterfly replace the caterpillar?”*** No. The butterfly is the organic fulfillment of the caterpillar, just as the Church is the continuation and fulfillment of Israel.

The 144,000 in Revelation 14:1-5

On occasion in the OT, Zion could refer to the hilly area in southeast Jerusalem, to the temple mount, to the historical city of Jerusalem, and even to the entire nation of Israel. In Psalm 2:6, Zion is the “holy mountain” of God on which he installs Messiah as King. In other words, Zion may be the eschatological city where God dwells with and protects his people. Hebrews 12:22-23 (cf. Gal. 4:25-27) refers to Zion as the ideal, heavenly city to which believers even now aspire (and in which they hold citizenship; cf. Phil. 3:20) during the course of the church age. In certain texts, Zion is indistinguishable from the redeemed who dwell there (see Isa. 62:1-12). Many contend that it is, in fact, a reference to the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21) which “comes down out of heaven” as a dwelling for God’s people. In any case, ***it is where the Lamb and his redeemed share fellowship and the authority of the kingdom.***

The “new song” (14:3) is most likely a hymn of praise for the victory God has secured on their behalf over the Dragon and his two beastly cohorts. You may recall that back in Revelation 2:17 Jesus said he would give to the overcomers “a new name written on the [white] stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.” Now we are told that only the redeemed, the 144,000, can “learn” the new song and sing it.

They are described as “ones who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins” (14:4a). Some have taken this literally as a group of celibate men. However, if the 144,000 is a symbol for the entire people of God, as I believe it is, this would mean he envisions all Christians as celibate! This may then be an allusion to the OT requirement that an Israelite soldier preserve ceremonial purity before entering battle (see Deut. 23:9-10; 1 Sam. 21:5; 2 Sam. 11:8-11). Others see in the word “virgins” (*parthenoi*) a metaphor of all saints, including women, who have not compromised with the world system or yielded to its idolatry. They have remained loyal as a “virgin bride” to their betrothed husband (see 19:7-9; 21:2; 2 Cor. 11:2). Remember that often times idolatry and injustice are figuratively pictured as “harlotry” or “sexual immorality” (see Jer. 3:1-10; 13:27; Ezek. 16:15-58; 23:1-49; 43:7; Hosea 5:4; 6:10). Israel’s idolatry was also described as “defilement” (Isa. 65:4; Jer. 23:15; 51:4). This is similar to what we find in Rev. 2:14, 20-22. In other texts in Revelation, to “fornicate” (*porneuo*) and its cognates usually are metaphorical for spiritual apostasy and idol worship (14:8; 17:1,2,4,5,15,16; 18:3,9; 19:2). When these words are used literally, they are part of vice lists (9:21; 21:8; 22:15).

In summary, the “virginity” in view here and the refusal to “defile” themselves with women is a figurative description of all believers, male and female, who resist the temptation to compromise morally with the system of the beast or to yield to its idolatrous ways.

They are also said to “follow the Lamb wherever he goes” (14:4b), a likely allusion to the statements found in the synoptic gospels about believers “following” Jesus (e.g., Mt. 8:19; 10:38; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:57; cf. 1 Pt. 221-22).

One element in following the Lamb is that “in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless” (v. 5). This is an allusion to Isaiah 53:9 where it is said of the suffering Messiah that “there was no deceit in his mouth.” This may be more than a reference to general truth-telling and point also to “the saints’ integrity in witnessing to Jesus when they are under pressure from the beast and the ‘false prophet’ to compromise their faith and go along with the idolatrous lie (so 13:10,18; 14:9-12)” (Beale, 746). They are “blameless” in the sense that they maintain a truthful witness concerning Jesus. They resist the temptation to embrace the “lie” of the beast.

Conclusion

To sum up simply, I believe Revelation 7:1-8 and 14:1-5 are John’s symbolic portrayal of the truth of Romans 8:35-39. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? [Or perhaps even Satan himself or the Beast or the False Prophet?] . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” And the way we conquer and persevere and endure is through the Holy Spirit whom Christ has sent to us, who seals us as God’s own, in whose strong and loving arms we live securely in the face of all evil.