Preaching Through The Bible
Revelation
Part 24

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THE SEVEN SEALS (4:1-8:1)
Safety in the Midst of Judgement (7:1-9)

• The first six seals

The six seals that have been opened have spoken to us of the Saviour who goes out conquering and to conquer. Following his message of salvation to the world is not the story of ease and comfort but the story of the tribulations of the church. Jesus brings salvation, but following his salvation are persecution, economic repression, religious wars and martyrdom[1]. Yet this is still not the whole story, for in John's vision he sees that all will be set right by the One who sits upon the throne and by the Lamb[2]. Jesus is the One who opens the seals. He will soon come in judgement and shake the universe. Sinners will flee in terror.

[1] 6:3-11

[2] 6:12-17

• Before the last seal, the vision jumps back to show that God's elect were not harmed in the judgement of the sixth seal

We are now expecting the opening of the seventh seal, and it will soon come[1]. But it does not come just yet! Before the end of final judgement and whatever may come with it in the seventh seal, there is another vision. The seventh seal will not be opened until something else comes into the sequence of visions.

[1] in 8:1

A comparison of Revelation 7:3 (where the earth is not to be harmed) and Revelation 6:12–17 (where the earth is harmed) will show us that in the sequence-of-events Revelation 7:1–17 comes before Revelation 6:12–17. It is only in the vision that 6:12–17 comes before 7:1–17. Revelation 7:1–17 gives us an assurance that in the judgement of 6:12–17 the people of God were not harmed. Before John goes on to the last seal[1] the vision jumps back a stage to let us know that God's elect were not involved in the judgement of the sixth seal.

[1] in 8:1

1. God's people are safe in judgement

1. **God's people are safe in judgement**. John sees four angels. [1]*After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth. The angels were holding back the four winds of the earth, so that no wind could blow on the earth, or on the sea, or on any tree*. The figure four speaks of the whole world. The winds that are about to blow are the forces of judgement. Everything is set for the punishment of sin and the vindication of God's martyrs. God is about to bring justice to its great conclusion.

• A seal on the foreheads of God's people – protection and ownership

But then another angel appears in John's vision. [2]*Then I saw another angel coming from the east and holding the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given the authority to bring harm to the earth and the sea*. Judgement is not allowed to fall just yet. The people of God must be protected first. The second angel calls out: [3]*'Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees, until we have put a seal upon the foreheads of the servants of our God.'* In the ancient world, a 'seal' prevented someone from interfering with whatever was sealed (as was the hope of the Romans in Matthew 27:66). It marked ownership (as we see in Song of Songs 8:6). It authenticated, showing that something was truly what it claimed to be (as a decree might be shown to be genuine[1]). Before judgement falls the people of God receive the mark of safety, ownership and reality. They will be safe when others are fleeing in terror.

[1] see Esther 3:12

• The mark of safety

2. The secure people of God are identified

2. **The secure people of God are identified**. Who – we might ask – are these people who receive the mark of genuineness and so are safe in judgement? They have been called '**the servants of God'**[1]. They

[1] 7:3

are the total number of God's people who serve him, the people who have been redeemed by the Lord Jesus Christ.

• They are God's true Israel

The vision proceeds to define them in another way. **They are God's true Israel**. [4]*Then I heard the number of the people who were sealed: 144,000, sealed out of every tribe of the people of Israel.* [5]*From the tribe of Judah were sealed 12,000 people. From the tribe of Reuben 12,000 people were sealed. From the tribe of Gad were sealed 12,000 people.* [6]*From the tribe of Asher 12,000 people were sealed. From the tribe of Naphtali 12,000 people were sealed. From the tribe of Manasseh 12,000 people were sealed.* [7]*From the tribe of Simeon were sealed 12,000 people. From the tribe of Levi 12,000 were sealed. From the tribe of Issachar 12,000.* [8]*From the tribe of Zebulun 12,000. From the tribe of Joseph 12,000. From the tribe of Benjamin were sealed 12,000.*

• 144,000 – a symbolic representation of the whole people of God

• 12 x 12 x 1000

Then, as John goes on looking, he calls these people 'a great multitude'. [9]*After this, I was looking, and there before me was a great multitude, that no one was able to count.* The 144,000 people are a symbolic representation of the whole people of God. It certainly is not a number that is meant to be taken with strict literalness. Scarcely any number in the book of Revelation is literal. They are almost all symbolic. Here the number is twelve times twelve times a thousand. The first twelve stands for old Israel with its twelve tribes. The second twelve stands for Israel restructured as the Christian church with its twelve apostles. The thousand stands for the vastness of the multitude. The description of the 144,000 immediately goes on to call the same people a 'multitude that no one can number'. This also indicates that the number must be symbolic.

One people of God

• People from every nation and from every tribe and people and language

There is one people of God. Originally it was the nation of Israel. The true believers in Israel were reduced to a remnant. Then gentiles were grafted into the remnant. The entire company of the saved are one spiritual people, God's true Israel. It originally had twelve tribes but those tribes soon lost their identity (which is another indication that the number 144,000 was not literal). 'Twelve tribes' was a way of speaking of every section of the people of God. *There were people from every nation and from every tribe and people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.* Before judgement falls such people are made to be entirely safe. God's judgement will pass them by completely.