God Protects His Own by the Seal of the Holy Spirit

Revelation 7

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| **Natural Divisions** | * Revelation 7:1-8 Although God’s judgments against sin will intensify, the full number of the people of God have received God’s seal of ownership and protection * Revelation 7:9-12 John sees a huge multiethnic assembly standing before God’s throne wearing white robes and holding palm branches, praising God for the salvation He has granted * Revelation 7:13-17 One of the elders told John that these white-robed souls were believers who had come out of the great tribulation and now stand in God’s presence and serve Him. |
| **Summary Sentence** | Believers are sealed by God so that they can persevere in faith through tribulation, and their reward is eternal joy in the presence of God |
| **Central Idea** | God protects the people of faith by the seal of the Holy Spirit |

Sometimes, when I read the daily news and see the suffering that is so prevalent in our world, I just get so sad. When I see the way men and women are unkind to others—the way men and women seem so hateful toward others, I’m so sad about that. I want the world to be different.

In our study of Revelation we’ve seen that the world we live in now is not the way it’s supposed to be. As a result of the fall of man, back in the Garden of Eden, we’re not the people we’re supposed to be. We’ve been damaged by sin. Societies are all polluted by sin. The world order suffers the effects of the sinfulness of man—there’s conquest and violence and war and economic hardship and disease and death. Because of the fall of man, the created order is no longer the way God intended for it to be.

But the Bible teaches that one day God will make all things right. God has a plan to establish a future kingdom of perfect righteousness. God has a plan to relocate His people to a future kingdom of blessing and fellowship and joy. One day Jesus will return in glory to establish the Kingdom of God. The book of Revelation is focused on the coming of that future day, and as we study the book of Revelation, we should be focused on that day as well.

We can be excited about this future kingdom, but as we’ve studied the book of Revelation, we may find ourselves fearful of what it’s going to take to get there. We understand that God will eventually make all things right, but we also understand that it’s going to get worse out there before it gets better. And we wonder, what’s it going to be like for Christians as the progress of history draws closer to the day of the return of Christ? What will it be like for the people of God as the day of final judgment approaches?

Last week we saw that in John’s vision of the throne room of God, Jesus, the Lamb of God, took a sealed scroll and Jesus began to break open the seven seals on that scroll. The text of Revelation doesn’t tell us specifically what the scroll represents, and there are various views on that.

I believe that the scroll represents God’s plan for the course of history proceeding from the victory won by Jesus at the cross and ending at the return of Jesus to establish the Kingdom of God. I’m persuaded that the scroll represents the course of history from the day of Christ’s death until the day of His return. I believe that the visions that follow the breaking of the seals portray the characteristics of life on this present sinful world.

Last week as we studied the breaking of the first six seals, we saw six visions. The first four visions gave a panoramic view of life in this present world—a world that remains under the strong influence of sin. We saw God’s ongoing limited judgment against the godlessness of this world. We saw that our world has continually and repeatedly suffered the destruction of conquest, war, famine, economic deprivation, violence, pestilence, civil uprisings, disease, and death. Pick up any newspaper and you’ll see that it’s true. Our world is not the way it’s supposed to be; our world is damaged by sin; our world is blighted with suffering.

Then we saw in the breaking of the fifth seal that through the ages there have been Christians who have suffered death for the cause of Christ, but those who have died in this way are standing even now in the presence of God.

The sixth seal was different. When Jesus broke the sixth seal, there was a vision of total destruction. There was a vision of worldwide catastrophe. This vision was a preview of the utter devastation of the earth in the day of the return of Christ. The last sentence of chapter 6 was a cry of despair. Those who have lived in rebellion against God will flee in terror in that day, and they will cry out, *“The great day of wrath has come, and who can stand?”* That is the fundamental question. In the day of God’s final wrath against sin, who can stand?

Chapter 7 answers that question.

Open your Bibles this morning to Revelation chapter 7.

We’ve just seen in Revelation chapter 6 a sobering account of fearful events on this present earth. We’ve seen some of the characteristics of life in a godless society under the chastening hand of God. What is to be the experience of believers as these judgments unfold? What is going to happen to the people of faith during times of great suffering? What about the believers who are living alongside the godless in these days?

The book of Revelation addresses this concern in chapter 7. We see in verses 1-8 of chapter 7 that God ultimately protects the people of faith by placing a seal on those who belong to Him. God treats His people with great mercy. **God protects the people of faith**.

Let’s look at verses 1-4. *“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.*

**God protects the people of faith** with a supernatural seal. What is this seal? Recall that the book of Revelation was written to seven churches in the province of Asia. When the Christians in these seven churches heard the word *seal*, what would have been their first thought? What would first-century Christians have understood this *seal* to be? All of these churches were very familiar with Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, and so they would have assumed that the seal is the Holy Spirit. Look at what Ephesians has to say.

In Ephesians 1:13, Paul says this: *“…when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in Christ, you were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.”*

In Ephesians 4:30, the Bible says that believers have been sealed by the Holy Spirit for the day of redemption.

The seal of the Holy Spirit enables believers to stand firm. The seal of the Holy Spirit enables believers to respond in faith to the suffering they encounter. Because believers are sealed by the Holy Spirit, the end result is that the trials we experience become the instruments by which God shapes our character.

In James 1:2-4, we find, *“Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter trials of various kinds, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”*

Because of the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit in us, the trials we encounter strengthen our faith. Just as the apparent *defeat* of Jesus at the cross became a *victory* over evil; even so, in our lives, the very sufferings that may be used by the Evil One to *assault* our faith will instead serve to *refine* our faith. **God protects the people of faith with the seal of the Holy Spirit**.

We have been sealed by the Holy Spirit, and this seal protects us spiritually. It’s not *physical* protection that is in view here—Christians can and do suffer physical harm. It’s not *physical* protection that’s in view here; it’s spiritual protection. The Holy Spirit protects our faith and our salvation from the persecution and deception we may encounter in this life. **God protects the people of faith with the seal of the Holy Spirit**.

Why does the text talk about putting the seal on the foreheads? The Holy Spirit isn’t a visible thing, so what is this notion of something on the forehead? Is this like a tattoo; is it something I should be able to see? In our tattoo-happy society, that would be the first thing we would think of.

But the *“seal on the forehead”* isn’t to be thought of a visible thing; it’s a concept. It was a common practice in the ancient world to mark slaves on the forehead to indicate who owned them and to whom they owed service.

When we became believers we were purchased by Christ. We saw in chapter 5 that Jesus is worthy to open the scroll because by His blood He purchased men and women for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. We are no longer our own; we’ve been bought with a price. There is a seal on our foreheads. It’s a concept; it’s not a literal imprint.

It’s very much like the way we use the expression *“she has him wrapped around her little finger.”* We know what that means, right? We don’t mean it literally. The image of having a seal on our forehead is an expression of the fact that we belong to God. The Holy Spirit guarantees that we belong to God. **God protects the people of faith with the seal of the Holy Spirit.**

When does this event of receiving God’s seal of protection occur? From the perspective of the believer, the Holy Spirit comes to us as a part of our experience of faith in Christ. When we place our faith in Jesus as our Savior, we receive the Holy Spirit. And so, if you are a believer, you have received God’s seal of protection. You’ve received God’s seal of ownership. You have received God’s Holy Spirit to graft you in—to join you—to the family of God. The Holy Spirit strengthens you and comforts you and protects you from evil. **God protects the people of faith with the seal of the Holy Spirit**.

For the believer, the Holy Spirit comes to us at the moment of faith. From the perspective of the God’s throne room, however, the Holy Spirit is sent to the earth before the events of chapter 6. The Holy Spirit is given before the four horsemen are sent to bring conflict and war and famine on the earth.

Look again at verse 1. *“…I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, so that no wind would blow on the earth or on the sea or on any tree.”* What are the four winds of the earth? The four winds of the earth are the four horsemen. The four winds of the earth are God’s instruments of judgment against His enemies. The elements of judgment described in chapter 6 are not sent to the earth until the Holy Spirit is given to people of faith.

In chapter 7, there is a curious description given of the of people who are given this seal of protection. This group is described this way: they are 144,000 Jews from all the tribes of Israel. Who are these believers? How are we to understand that description?

In the book of Revelation numbers usually represent *concepts*, not quantities. We use numbers to represent *quantities*; the ancient Hebrew often used numbers to represent *concepts* instead.

I believe that we are to interpret the number 144,000 figuratively. It’s an important number. It’s a striking number. The number 144,000 is a number that conveys an emphatic concept of completeness. 144,000 is 12 times 12 times 1000.

In the coming Kingdom the dwelling place of God is called the New Jerusalem. This holy city has the names of the twelve tribes of Israel written on its gates, and the names of the twelve apostles written on its foundations. Twelve times twelve. And so we have the twelve tribes of the Old Testament and the twelve apostles of the New Testament represented together in the New Jerusalem. Twelve times twelve.

The concept here is that the Kingdom of God—the New Jerusalem—the New Israel—will include people of faith from the Old Testament and people of faith from the New Testament. It’s the concept of completeness—12 times 12.

The number 10 also connotes completeness, and the number 1000—10x10x10 is ultra-emphasized completeness. So we have 12 times 12 time 10 times 10 times 10. We’re talking about the complete family of God. We’re talking about all of the people of faith—believing Jews and believing Gentiles. All of the people of faith will live with God in the New Jerusalem.

So in verses 3 and 4, the people of faith on earth are protected by the seal of the Holy Spirit. In our lives, we may face suffering and trials but in the midst of these sorrows, we can be confident that **God protects the people of faith with the seal of the Holy Spirit**.

And then, beginning in verse 9, we move ahead in time and we see the people of faith after their earthly lives have been completed. They are standing in the throne room of God, in front of the Lamb, enjoying the reward of their ultimate glory in the presence of God in heaven.

Look at verses 9-10. *“After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"”*

This family of believers is a multitude that no one could count. They are celebrating before the throne of God. They are dressed in white, signifying purity and holiness. They’re holding palm branches, and they’re singing.

This multitude of believers is crying out to God, saying, *“Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”* They’re saying, in essence, *“Our salvation has come from God, and from the Lamb. You, O God, are the one to whom we owe our salvation.”*

Now look at verses 11-12. *“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 forever and ever. Amen!’”*

This is a beautiful example for us. What we see around the throne of God is gratitude and worship and praise.

Sometimes, when we come before God in prayer, our prayers are more like complaints than gratitude. Sometimes we fail to thank God for the abundant blessings He has given us. Instead, we focus on what’s wrong in our lives. We complain to God about what is lacking in our lives. That’s not what you see going on in heaven. The multitudes declare something good that God has done, and the angels fall down in worship.

It would be good if our prayer were more like that. We need to learn to see the blessings of God in our lives and worship Him. When our prayer time is mostly pleading with God about what is wrong in our lives, that drags us down. When our prayer time is praising Him for His goodness and His glory, that lifts us up. It would be good if our prayer more nearly corresponded to what’s happening in heaven. It would be good to look for reasons to praise God, not reasons to complain.

There’s a multitude in heaven, standing before the throne and praising God. Who are these people?

As John observed this vision of the multitude before the throne of God, one of the elders came to John and

asked John, *“These people in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?”* John didn’t know, so John said, *“Sir, you know.”* You know who they are; tell me.

The elder said this, in verse 14. *“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.”*

What do we mean by the term *“the great tribulation”* as it’s used in verse 14? In Matthew 24:21, Jesus described the time of His return, and Jesus said, *“… there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will.”* We refer to this time of tribulation that Jesus described as the Great Tribulation, with a capital G and a capital T. Immediately after this Great Tribulation, Jesus will return. The question is, is this great tribulation referred to in verse 14 the same as the final, unparalleled Great Tribulation that Jesus spoke of?

There are differences of opinion here. There are questions about timing; there are questions about sequences of events…but to my thinking the issue is not which tribulation they came from; the issue is not which period of tribulation they endured—the central point is that they *came out*. They didn’t lose their faith. They didn’t suffer spiritual loss. They didn’t transfer their allegiance to Satan. **They had iron-clad protection from God**. They had the seal of the Holy Spirit to protect them in suffering. They stood firm in faith. They emerged as overcomers and now they stand as victors before the throne of God. **God protects the people of faith with the seal of the Holy Spirit.** God protects the people of faith as they as they live out their lives through the experience of tribulation.

The elder who was speaking with John went on to highlight some of the blessings these risen believers enjoy in heaven. Look at verses 15-17. *“…they are before the throne of God; and they 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 the water of life. And God will wipe every tear from their eyes.”*

What are the blessings we see here?

First, they enjoy the presence of God—fellowship with God—a place right before His throne. God is near to them; they gaze upon His face.

Second, they are engaged in meaningful service. They have significance; they have purpose; they have a place in God’s plan. They use their talents and abilities in God’s service day and night.

Third, they enjoy God’s personal protection. God spreads His tent over them. His tent is His dwelling place. His tent represents His ongoing presence with them and His personal protective care. Think of when your children were young and you went camping together. Think of pulling your child into your sleeping bag with you, so that your child could snuggle in your arms and feel safe and warm close to your heart. In the same way our God draws His children close to Himself. We are safe and loved in His everlasting arms.

Fourth, they no longer suffer the difficulties of life in a fallen state. There is no more hunger; no more thirst; no more scorching heat.

Fifth, the Lamb will be their shepherd. Jesus will be the righteous King, the perfect Protector, the wisest Guide. There will be no worry, no fear, no injustice with Jesus as their Shepherd. Jesus will tenderly care for each of His children.

Sixth, the Lamb will lead them to springs of the water of life. Springs represent an inexhaustible source. Eternal life is eternal. Eternal life is abundant. Eternal life is satisfying. The Lamb provides *springs* of the water of life.

Finally, God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. The sorrows of this world are a thing of the past.

Most of us suffer from near-sightedness when it comes to our view of life. We see what is earthly; we have a hard time visualizing what is heavenly. We understand very well the blessings and the advantages and the abundance to be desired in this world; we have very little appreciation for the blessings of heaven. We live in fear of earthly dangers. We worry about dying. Most of us are so enmeshed in the things of this life that we give little or no thought to the blessings of the next. We have a hard time gaining comfort in the certainty of heaven. Perhaps we even wonder, is heaven really real?

There is a parable that is told of two twin boys growing in their mother’s womb. As the weeks passed and the twins developed, their self-awareness grew, and they were happy. They communicated with each other. *“Isn't it great to be alive! Isn’t it wonderful that we were conceived?”*

Together the twins explored their world. When they found their mother's cord that gave them life, and they were so happy! *“How great our mother's love is, that she shares her own blood, her own life with us!”*

As weeks stretched into months, the twins noticed how much each of them was changing. They were getting older. *“What does it mean?”* one of them asked.

*“It means that our stay in this world is drawing to an end.”* said the other. *“It’s time for our birth.”*

*“But I don't want to go,”* said one. *“I want to stay here always.”*

*“We have no choice,”* said the other. *“But maybe there is life after birth.”*

*“But how can there be?”* responded one. *“We will shed our life cord and how can life be possible without it? Besides, we have seen evidence that others were here before us, and none of them has returned to tell us there is life after birth. No, this is the end. Maybe there is no mother after all.”*

*“But there has to be a mother,”* protested the other. *“How else did we get here? How do we remain alive if there’s no mother?”*

*“Have you ever seen our mother?”* said one.

*“Maybe she only lives in our minds. Maybe we made her up because the idea of a mother made us feel good.”*

So the last days in the womb were filled with deep questioning and fear. Finally, the moment of birth arrived. When the twins had passed from their world, they opened their eyes and cried for joy—for what they saw exceeded their fondest dreams.

One day you and I will pass from this world into the next, and we will find that God has protected our faith for that moment, and heaven is a place that will exceed our greatest dreams. One day we will cast aside this life and on that day, we will see His face.

Let’s close in prayer.