

*We exist to make disciples who delight in God and make Him known
by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.*

Grace in The Midst of Wrath **Revelation 7**

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PowerPoint Presentation included: None

SermonAudio Blurb: Chapter 6 showed us the beginning of the unfolding wrath of God. It doesn't get better, only worse in the time of the Great Tribulation. But even in the midst of that wrath there are poignant moments where God's saving grace is seen. Two are seen in this chapter, the choosing of 144,000 Jews and the gathering into the arms of God of those believers who died so far in the Tribulation.

I. Introduction.

- A. Read chapter 7.
- B. Time frame:
 - 1. Your approach to the whole book determines how you will read chapters 6-19.
 - 2. I view this book from a futuristic perspective. Meaning this is something that is to come, not something that has taken place.
 - a. This means that we are not looking at a broad overview of the church's history.
 - b. Nor do we look back to the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.
 - c. These chapters are laying out the fulfillment of the plan and decrees of the Creator and Lord of this world. And no one can thwart His hand.
 - d. A key phrase that you may want to underline in your bible is "after this."
 - (1) It is one of the simplest ways to realize this is a chronological flow, not one where time and events jump around or are being repeated over and over in slightly different ways (called the recapitulation view).
 - (2) Remember this basic rule about pronouns, you need to figure out the antecedent to understand it.

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3. I also take this in a realistic perspective. Meaning, unless the context demands otherwise, we take the text for what it says rather than make it all a spiritual meaning or hyper-symbolic.
 - a. I plan on spending some of my time this sermon dealing with this in relationship to the use of numbers in Revelation.
 - b. It is obvious that much of this chapter deals with numbers and math and counting. How one approaches this can radically change the meaning of the text.
- C. But I also want to make sure we get beyond those points of disagreement on how to approach Revelation and see more of God. In this passage you see grace in the midst of wrath.
- D. The passage breaks down into two basic sections:
 1. The faithful on earth (1-8).
 2. The faithful in heaven (9-12).

II. Grace in the midst of wrath.

- A. First, how this fits into the flow of Revelation.
 1. Remember, from chapter 6-19 we are seeing the time known as the Great Tribulation.
 2. It is arranged neatly in the breaking of the seven seals described in chapters 5-6.
 3. In 8:1 the seventh seal is broken and from it there are seven angels with trumpets. As each sounds the time of misery and wrath grows.
 4. From there we have the seven bowls being poured out.
 5. Interspersed throughout these events are interludes/pauses. Sometimes it is almost to catch our breath. Other times it gives us some additional details of what is actually happening “behind the scenes.”
- B. The Faithful on Earth (1-8).
 1. What do the four winds that are being held back by the angels represent? A couple of views that bear mentioning:
 - a. The first is that they are the 4 horsemen of chapter 6. The angels are holding back for a time of respite the destruction that has come forth from these horsemen.

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- (1) This is rather frustrating as I studied it as so many commentators were trying to say the angels were the wind, or they were other angels who were sent to prevent the four angels in chapter 6 from acting.
 - (2) There is a lot of this in much of what you read in books and comments on Revelation. Either they take a very broad, high look at the text ignoring the details or they work hard at making the text not mean what it seems to say.
- b. The second is that it is an apocalyptic mention of the withholding of the trumpets of judgment described in chapter 8ff.
- (1) The first reason for this is that these things were “after this” (1).
 - (2) Second, the wind is never explicitly said to be released by the angels later in the book; rather, instead the judgments of God continue to roll forward. Remember that apocalyptic language is very fluid and has no trouble mixing metaphors in the most impossible of ways.
 - (3) Third, notice chapter 8 that there were four trumpets in succession (8:7-13), then an interlude with the last three being of a different quality. They affect the earth in a unique manner.
 - (4) Fourth, there was the sealing of the people who were God’s prior to this unleashing (7:3). This sealing was the reason for the withholding of the wind.

It is worth noting as we go through this book the central role that angelic beings play in the plan of God. An interesting task for you to do with your family is to read through Revelation 4-22 a chapter at a time with your friends or family and slowly highlight all of their mentionings and their tasks.

2. The sealing of the people.
 - a. All sorts of silliness has come from this passage as well as the one speaking of the mark of the beast.
 - b. What is it?
 - (1) Revelation 14:1 mentions them again.

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- (2) Ezekiel 9:1-6 is very helpful for it is apocalyptic in nature as well. These are the people of God who love God and desire Him over all other things. They are opposed to and scandalized by the evil of Satan in the world.
 - (3) They shall be saved from the effects of the four winds to come.
 - (4) I am reminded of the plagues in Egypt in Exodus 8:22 and 9:4.
3. The 144,000.
- a. So many ideas that it can become overwhelming when looking at the various ideas proffered..
 - b. One, that it is one of completion and fullness.
 - c. Many would hold that it simply represents the people of God. The number 144 000 is symbolic: representing 12 tribes from the Old Testament and 12 Apostles from the NT - 12 x 12 x 10 x 10 x 10 represents completion, the totality of God's people. Revelation 7 also suggests that none are left out of the 144 000 - they are not just a part of the whole, but the totality of all the redeemed.
 - d. Another view sees that this is the number of those who will survive the tribulation.
 - e. Another is that it represents the martyrs who are to come from Revelation 6:11.
 - f. A final view is that it is a special subset of saved Jews who are going to be uniquely used by God to be His witnesses during this dark time.
 - (1) I think this is best simply because of how great the emphasis is upon the name "Israel" in the following vss.
 - (2) Most objections to this simply flow from a belief that the Church is the New Israel and it has replaced the ethnic Israel of old.
 - (3) The problem with that is that there is no clear example from the New Testament where the church has replaced Israel. It

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is driven from a theological position rather than a biblical one.

- g. Compare this with Kevin DeYoung's popular post on The Gospel Coalition site entitled "Who are The 144,000 in Revelation?" (I post only the key points that bear comment) I use this to illustrate how so many approach this book and work hard at ignoring its own context.
- (1) First, in chapter 13 we read that Satan seals all of his followers, so it makes sense that God would seal all of his people, not just the Jewish ones.
 - (a) This means nothing. He already knows that all believers are sealed by the Holy Spirit as stated in Ephesians 1 and 4.
 - (b) But there is nothing at all that precludes unique sealing.
 - (2) Second, the image of sealing comes from Ezekiel 9 where the seal on the forehead marks out two groups of people: idolaters and non-idolaters. It would seem that the sealing of the 144,000 makes a similar distinction based on who worships God not who among the Jewish remnant worships God.
 - (a) Based on what in the Revelation context?
 - (b) Notice how he goes to a different passage to explain this passage.
 - (3) Third, the 144,000 are called the servants of our God (Rev. 7:3). There is no reason to make the 144,000 any more restricted than that. In Revelation, the phrase "servants of God" always refers to all of God's redeemed people, not just an ethnic Jewish remnant (see 1:1; 2:20; 19:2; 19:5; 22:3).
 - (a) Except that this is exactly what John does in the actual passage by then defining who is the subject in verse 4.

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- (b) Notice also how he will take “bond-servants” or “servants of our God” literally and then treats “Israel” none literally.
 - (c) Notice also how he nicely states that servants of God **always** refers to all of God’s redeemed. Yet in reality it doesn’t. In 2:20 it refers to the believers in Thyatira. In 7:3 it refers to male Israelites. And in 11:18 it speaks of the prophets and even makes a distinction between the prophets and the saints.
- (4) Fourth, the 144,000 mentioned later in chapter 14 are those who have been “redeemed from the earth” and those who were “purchased from among men.” This is generic everybody kind of language. The 144,000 is a symbolic number of redeemed drawn from all peoples, not simply the Jews. Besides, if the number is not symbolic then what do we do with Revelation 14:4 which describes the 144,000 as those “who have not defiled themselves with women”? Are we to think that the 144,000 refers to a chosen group of celibate Jewish men? It makes more sense to realize that 144,000 is a symbolic number that is described as celibate men to highlight the group’s moral purity and set-apartness for spiritual battle.
- (a) What stands out here how hard he is working at avoiding the very clear statement by John that these are Israelites. They come from specific tribes of Israel. And they are all male.
 - (b) Notice how incredulous he is to think that in 14:4 it could possibly mean celibate Jewish men.
- (5) Fifth, the last reason for thinking that the 144,000 is the entire community of the redeemed is because of the highly stylized list of tribes in verses 5-8. The number itself is stylized. It’s not to be taken literally. It’s 12 x 12 x 1000—12 being the number of completion for God’s people (representing the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles of the Lamb) and 1000 being a generic number suggesting a

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great multitude. So 144,000 is a way of saying all of God's people under the old and new covenant.

- (a) Notice the utter lack of evidence given to these arguments.
 - (b) Not to be taken literally but no reason why.
 - (c) 12 = the completion of God's people, but no actual basis for it.
 - (d) 1,000 merely is a generic number with no meaning other than a great multitude.
- (6) Finally, notice how John has no trouble telling us when there is a large group that is beyond counting:
- (a) Revelation 5:5.
 - (b) Revelation 7:9; 19:1, 6.
 - (c) Revelation 17:15.
- h. Listen now to how another commentator approaches this same passage:

“John hears the number of the sealed. He does not see their exact number for these sealed ones are still on earth. Only God knows how many truly sealed people there are on earth. The number is 144,000. This, of course, is symbolical. First, the number three, indicating the Trinity, is multiplied by four, indicating the entire creation, for the sealed ones shall come from the east and the west, the north and the south. Three times four makes twelve. This number therefore indicates: the Trinity (3) operating in the universe (4).² When the Father through the Son in the Spirit performs His saving work on earth—the divine (3) operating in the universe (4)—we see in the old dispensation the twelve (3×4) patriarchs and in the new the twelve apostles. In order to arrive at the conception of the Church of the old and of the new dispensation we shall have to multiply this twelve by twelve. This gives us 144.” (Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors: An Interpretation of The Book of Revelation*)

- i. Beloved, behind and through all of this exercise is an effort to cut through a lot of the smoke that gets blown about when trying to work through this book.

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- (1) Remember it is inspired by the Holy Spirit.
 - (2) It is assumed to be understandable as in the first chapter those who hear and heed it shall be blessed by God.
 - (3) And it gives us the plan of God for all of creation. It tells us what is to happen.
4. A problem with the tribes.
- a. The birth and description of the sons of Jacob show up in many places in the Old Testament.
 - b. Of all those places, the arrangements differ in 19 ways.
 - c. None of the Old Testament arrangements agree with Revelation 7 though the closest is Ezekiel 48:30-34. That passage also included Levi and Joseph like John did.
 - d. Where is Dan?
 - (1) One view is that Dan became extinct in the captivity.
 - (2) Another is that it means nothing, since other listings of the names have other tribes not mentioned.
 - (3) A third is that it lost its inheritance because it failed to conquer its land became idolatrous. This is actually a very common theme in the Old Testament.
 - e. Where is Ephraim?
 - (1) One explanation is that it is similar to Dan. Along with this is that Ephraim became connected with being an enemy of the people of God.
 - (2) Another view simply sees him found in his father's name—Joseph.
 - f. Why Manasseh?
 - (1) He too was the son of Joseph, which would seem to remove the second view above from contention.
 - (2) The best here is that he was the faithful son. Remember that Joseph was given a double portion from God in the

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land of Israel (Ephraim and Manasseh). One son kept it, the other lost it.

5. So what?
 - a. This is pure grace by God toward the people of Israel.
 - b. This is the beginnings of what will ultimately be a full-fledged ingathering of Israel back to their Messiah. The future salvation of Israel.
 - c. Romans 11 speaks to this issue.
 - (1) Currently we are in the time of the Gentiles. God has hardened the hearts of the Jewish people while He saves many Gentiles.
 - (2) But here, we see the working of God's grace among His people for His glory.
 - (3) But in the end, there shall be a great, national revival of Israel that results in their salvation. This will occur at the end of the Great Tribulation and we will look at it when we get there.

C. The Faithful in Heaven (9-17).

1. Now we move to a vague but huge number and they are all in heaven praising God.
 - a. Again we are reminded that worship and praise is what we are designed to be doing.
 - b. And what stands out again is how natural it is in heaven and how unnatural it can be on earth.
 - c. I always loved John Piper's statement about why missions exists; because worshipers don't. At the core of everything in this book, what we see is that God is redeeming a people who shall be able to worship Him in the fulness of who He is.
2. Who are they?
 - a. Again it is frustrating to read this passage in so many commentaries where they simply dismiss what it says and instead make it to mean every Christian who suffers.

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- b. They are Jewish and Gentiles who have died during the tribulation, but were faithful to the end of their lives (14).
 - c. They may be you and I.
 - d. Note the joy in their hearts. No sorrow over their suffering, no resentment.
 - e. For them, their rest has come and they only now anticipate the resurrection at the coming of Jesus.
3. Note the content of the songs of both the believers and the angels.
- a. The believers rejoice in their salvation.
 - (1) The salvation is more than from sin and its consequences.
 - (2) The fuller sense is that it speaks of victory. The victory of God. Isaiah 52:7 How lovely on the mountains Are the feet of him who brings good news, Who announces peace And brings good news of happiness, Who announces salvation, And says to Zion, "Your God reigns!"
 - b. The angels rejoice is the saving work of God for mankind. Their's is not personal, but focused on God work for man, while the humans are for the work of God in their lives.

III. Conclusion.

- A. In vss 14-17 we have the final words of grace and comfort.
- B. Beloved, in the time of the Tribulation it will be hard.
 - 1. Christ warns that many will fall away.
 - 2. And yet for those who endure the promise is clear, the battle is won and the battle is finished. No more tears, no more sin, no more suffering, no more lies.
 - 3. Instead you will serve your Lord in the fullness of your being and in the perfections of the resurrection.
 - 4. And in that time anything you suffer here and now will be as nothing.
- C. But this is also a call to you to consider who God has put into your life to speak hope in Jesus Christ?

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IV. Benediction/Doxology.

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Small Group Questions

- **Summer Break**