

"Let the Winds Blow"

In the first chapter of Revelation, after the first vision the first thing Jesus says is "*fear not*". Those words communicate, at the very beginning, an important part of the larger message of Revelation. *The issue of fear is a big part of the human condition but the promises of Jesus give us a cause for courage.* This is the message in Revelation 7. In Revelation 6 we were given a potentially scary vision of the troubles that will unfold throughout history, intensify in the end and culminate in the day of God's wrath. Revelation 6 ends with the question, "*who can stand?*" Revelation 7 gives the answer.

To get to the answer we have to work through some things that can be challenging and controversial. The best way to approach the vision in Revelation 7 is to first get a sense of what the whole vision communicates and the courage it gives. Then, if we need to, in weeks to come, we can go deeper into the details. It's also important to remember that the book of Revelation is highly symbolic so we have to look for the principles in the pictures. The reason many people are confused by Revelation or don't get anything out of it is because they focus on the pictures instead principles. There are three key truths or principles pictured here in the vision of Revelation 7. It is interesting in that even if you differ from me on some of the details of the vision these three principles remain the same and apply to us all.

What are the three principles?

1. God seals his servants to protect them. 1-4
2. God's sealed servants form a holy army. 5-8
3. God's holy army will win a total victory. 9-17

The vision begins with the truth that

I. GOD SEALS HIS SERVANTS TO PROTECT THEM.

In **Revelation 7:1-3** John sees a vision of *four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree.* Then he sees *another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, ³ saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads."* We have to continually remember this is a

vision - It is highly symbolic. In the vision these angels are holding back all the harmful storms of life and history and of judgment until the servants of God have been sealed.

What is the significance of a seal? In the Bible If something was sealed by an important or powerful person that seal meant it belonged to him or to her and it was under their protection and care.

Once I was counseling a couple who asked me to marry them. I noticed the girl had her former boyfriend's name, "Robbie" tattooed on her ankle. Her fiancée's name was C.J. So I asked C.J. how he felt about that – I'm thinking he might like for her to cover that over with a nice Celtic knot or a unicorn or something. But he said, "It's cool, no big deal." Call me old fashioned – I'd prefer not to have an old boyfriend's name tattooed on my wife's ankle. I actually think it might bother me if I was a woman and my future husband *didn't care* if his name was C.J. and I had *Robbie* inked on my leg! I know there is an unhealthy human jealousy but there is also a positive side to a love that wants to possess and protect and be your one and only. The Bible says God's love for you is like that. So when you become His he puts his seal on you. **2 Corinthians 1:21-22**, *And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us,* ²² *and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.* In a culture where even having someone's name inked onto your very body might not mean much we need to know that when God seals his servants it means something. Notice that last word. God's seal is a *guarantee*. What Revelation 7 pictures for the servants of God facing all the challenges of life and tribulation is something God promises all his children. Once you come to him, and connect with him through faith in Jesus he will never lose you. He will never let you go.

God gives us this assurance – he seals his servants. That's the first principle in the vision of Revelation 7. The second is that.

II. GOD'S SEALED SERVANTS FORM A HOLY ARMY.

Beginning in **verse 4** He says, *And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel.* Then **verse 5** says, *12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed,* and this begins a list that goes through twelve tribes.

A. What we have here is an army of conquest.

1. It's an army. The symbolism in Revelation is drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures. The Old Testament book of Numbers tells how as the Israelites prepared to enter the Promised Land the LORD spoke to Moses and told him to organize an army. He said, Take a census of all the congregation of *Israel*. *"From twenty years old and upward, all in Israel who are able to go to war you and Aaron shall list them company by company."* (**Numbers 1:3**) Then the rest of the chapter lists them tribe by tribe. Later in Numbers there is a war against the Midianites. **Numbers 31:5** says, *So there were provided, out of the thousands of Israel, a thousand from each tribe, twelve thousand armed for war.* The picture in Revelation 7 is based on this. And now it is not 1,000 from each tribe but 12,000 from each tribe!

2. This imagery of an army fits the big theme of conquering in Revelation. The word *conquer* appears more often in Revelation than any other book in the Bible. Every one of the seven letters to the churches in **Revelation 2-3** end with some promise addressed to the one who conquers: *The one who conquers will eat of the tree of life, will have authority over the nations, I will write on him my name. He will sit with me on my throne.* **Revelation 12:11** pictures a battle with Satan and it says of the followers of Jesus. *And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.*

The 144,000 are an army of conquest and...

B. This army is a symbol for all the followers of Jesus.

1. Some people insist on interpreting this literally. They say it's 144,000 Jewish men who will serve some special mission during seven years of tribulation before the second coming of Christ. If you take it that way you still have to reflect on what the application would be to our lives. So what is the principle in this picture? It is a picture of an army organized in regiments. Doesn't Scripture say that all believers are only sealed by the Spirit but are also soldiers for the Lord? We are to fight the good fight, to take up the armor of God?

2. The number 144,000 is symbolic of completeness. Some people say you should not interpret anything symbolically unless the Bible explicitly tell us to take it symbolically. But in Revelation that doesn't hold up. In the opening verses of Revelation 7 there are four angels holding back the four winds from the four corners of the earth. That is all symbolic. It's a vision. We don't say that means the earth is a square with four corners or there are four winds not three or five.

It is a symbol of the truth that God seals his servants to protect them from all the forces of evil. Even numbers can be symbolic. In **Psalm 50** when God says *the cattle on a thousand hills are mine*. Does that mean he does not own the cows on hill number one thousand and one? No! The number 12 squared and multiplied by a thousand is a symbol of perfect completeness and of all of God's people.

3. In Revelation 14 the 144,000 are described in ways that connect them to all the saved . 1.) There we're told that they have been *redeemed from mankind*. That's the same description used throughout Revelation for all of the saved. And this would be a strange way to describe them if they are only literally and physically Jewish. 2.) We're told that as the redeemed they sing "*a new song*" that only they can sing. But in Revelation 5 the "new song" is a song about all the redeemed from every tribe and tongue and nation. 3.) We're told in Revelation 14 that *the name of the Lamb and the name of the Father is written on their foreheads*. Again, throughout Revelation that same description is used of all of the saved. (Revelation 9:4, 22:4 cp also 13:16, 14:1, 17:5,20:4)

C. This symbolism is significant for us.

Have you heard of the Screwtape Letters? C.S. Lewis wrote a series of imaginary letters between an experienced demon Screwtape and his young nephew Wormwood. The experienced tempter tell his younger nephew how to mess of the life of a new Christian. In one letter the older demon is telling the younger one how to get his victim to think about the church. He says when he comes to church get him to focus on the fact that most of the people in the church are the kinds of people he tries to avoid all through the week! He says you want him to see people looking oily and singing poorly. You want him to think about expressions like "the body of Christ" and then look around at the real people and experience disappointment. At one point he says this: "*Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy. But fortunately it is quite invisible to these humans.*" What Lewis tapped into in his fiction is that the way you see and imagine the church matters. What Revelation is showing you is that God's sealed servants form a holy army. In the media and in the mirror we may look ragged but God says we are a chosen and holy people, like Israel entering the promised land we are God's army on earth.

I know a young lady who was studying about discipleship and the word, *battling* came up somewhere in the discussion. That word, “battling” struck a spark. She could relate to that. She said when she was growing up in high school, if girls had a conflict it was on - they were fired up and ready to fight. It was, “I don't care where, if I see you at the mall, if I run into you at Walmart, it's going down.” The point was that attitude resonated and the light came on - “That how I'm supposed to be with sin and temptation!” Followers of Jesus had better be fighters. We war against the world, the flesh and the devil. We fight sin in our selves and work to put it to death. We fight injustice in the world with good works and compassion. We pray as part of our warfare for God's kingdom to come and his will to be done. We work, and witness together because we are at war with evil, and darkness. *You can be weak and follow Jesus but you cannot be a wimp and follow Jesus!* Where are you fighting today? If you are not fighting anywhere than you are not following somewhere. If there is no battling in your life you are not following Jesus as your king. Because Jesus is a warrior and his followers are fighters.

Here's the third principle. The truth in verses 9-10 is that

III. GOD'S ARMY WILL ACHIEVE TOTAL VICTORY.

Do you remember in **Revelation 5** something interesting happened? The same thing happens here. In chapter 5 John was weeping because no one could open the scroll that was sealed with seven seals. Then he heard one of the elders tell him to stop weeping because the lion of the tribe of Judah had conquered and could open the scroll. So he looked but when he looked what he saw was not a lion but a lamb who took the scroll. (Revelation 5:4-5)

John said he *heard* the number of those sealed was 144,000, he *heard* all that followed about 12,000 from each of the tribes, but he never saw that. He hears about 144,000 but when he looks what does he see? **Verse 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, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb. Just as the lion of the tribe of Judah proves to be the lamb who was slain, so the army of 144,000 braced for battle proves to be an uncountable, multi-ethnic, multitude celebrating a victory already won by the lamb who was slain.*

A. The victory comes from God.

That's the focus from **verse 10-14**. The multitude cries out Salvation belongs to our God, the elders and the living creatures fall down and worship God, the multitude are then described as those who *have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb*. If you are new to all this please understand this is Revelation's vivid way of saying you can only be saved by the grace of God through the sacrifice of Jesus.

Think of the robe as a picture of how you make yourself presentable to a king. Your robe is filthy. You have dignity because you are made in the image of God but there is a depravity and sinfulness in you that God hates. Revelation uses this ironic imagery, you have to wash your robes in the blood of the lamb. Which means you have to turn to Jesus and trust in him as your Savior believing his sacrificial death and shed blood paid for your sins. It doesn't matter who you are there is only one way to be acceptable and presentable to God. It is only through the faith that turns to Christ and trust in him.

The victory of God's army comes from God by grace and by God's power so he is praised. And...

B. The victory is total and final.

Verses 15-17 *“Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. ¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.¹⁷ For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”*

Illustration: In the movie Money Ball about the Oakland Athletics baseball team there is a scene in which a minor league catcher named Jeremy Brown is up at bat. He's overweight and out of shape and he has a reputation for being scared to go for second base when he hits the ball. So in this scene he is up to bat, the pitcher throws a fastball and he hits it out toward center field. As he starts running - it's clear he's going to try to do what he never does. He's gonna go for it; he's gonna round first and go for second. But as Jeremy rounds first and appears to be headed for second, he stumbles, and then falls and literally crawls back to the security of first base. He's lying on the

ground clinging to first like a frightened child clings to a teddy bear. The manager watching this says, "This is all Jeremy's nightmares coming to life," People in the stands - they're all laughing at him. But people are yelling to him and gesturing and then Jeremy finds out why they are laughing. When he hit the ball, the ball went 60-feet over the fence. He hit a home run, and he didn't realize it. Watching a clip of this one of the managers says: *"It's a metaphor"*. Can you see in that scene a metaphor for your life – and especially your life as a follower of Christ? Sometimes fear makes us cling to safety when we should be living a life of faith that is lived full out and all in for Jesus. What Revelation 7 tells us is that if you have received Christ, you are going to make it home safe! You don't need to be afraid to run, to battle, risk, to follow Jesus. When Revelation talks about making it home it's not talking about rounding the bases in a game and enjoying a moment of glory; it's talking about the ultimate homecoming in life and the ultimate glory for eternity.

Conclusion

Toward the end of Revelation where after talking about the goodness of heaven it talks about the people who will not enter, the lost, the damned. Do you know what comes first in the list? Not the murderers or the sorcerors of the sexually immoral, all that comes later. The first two listed are the cowards and the faithless. The Bible doesn't see courage as something only certain naturally nervy people have. Courage is faith chosing to believe God when it really counts.

What are you most afraid of? Where is fear taking the edge off your spiritual life, your joy, your peace, your commitment? Where is making you vulnerable to temptation, or selfish and self-protective? If you let that fear rule your life and determine your choices then at that point Jesus isn't ruling your life and determining your choices - so that thing has taken the place of God - it rules as lord in your life. That's not just wrong, it is dangerous and evil.

Jesus is calling you to let go of those fears. To turn from them in repentance and renew your faith in Him. He shed his blood so that you could stand in the innumerable multitude clothed in white, so that he could be the shepherd who leads you to water and wipes away your tears. He has sealed you by his Spirit and already walks with you in life as you follow him and fight for him. So trust in him.

Amen.