

Title: “Sealed and Suffering”  
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Text: Revelation 7  
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## “Sealed and Suffering”

### **Introduction:**

I’m a huge fan of Sherlock Holmes. Not just like I watch BBC Sherlock either-- I’ve read the canon, a biography of Arthur Conan-Doyle, and yes I watch Elementary, and the BBC Sherlock, my wife even got me a Sherlock Holmes video game for my birthday. Most of you have probably read some of those stories or watched some of the shows or movies.

This probably seems like a weird place to start a sermon on Revelation 7, but I’ve been trying to work Holmes in for months, so... Seriously though, there are a few recurring components of the original Holmes stories that help us understand this text.

First, there is often a Scotland Yard inspector (like Lestrade or Gregson). Sherlock Holmes and his methods do not make sense to them, and at some point that Inspector will declare that they have cracked the case without Holmes’ help thank-you-very-much. (Of course, they are always wrong). Second, Holmes’ companion Watson who to some degree understands Holmes’ method, but really he risks life and limb not because he himself has all the answers but because he trusts Holmes. Third, and most obviously, with very few exceptions, Holmes is not just one or two steps ahead of Watson, the Police, and the criminals—but very often has solved or hypothesized the solution from his first

hearing of the case. He seems to be the only one who is navigating with a full map, he the only character who knows the end from the beginning.

When we read or hear the Bible, we can be like one of those presumptuous Inspectors—we already think we've got things figured out. We don't need God's help, and his ways don't make very much sense to us anyway.

Revelation calls us to be like Watson, obedient, ready to risk, not waiting for perfect understanding, but ever-trusting the one who has proven perfectly faithful.

And obviously, the analogy to Holmes here is strained—God not knows the end not because he sees and deduces what others don't—God is the author of History. He sets the course of all events. He *is* the Alpha and Omega, the Creator and Redeemer, and here's why this matters:

In Revelation 7 God is showing us something that on the human level doesn't make sense: Namely, that:

***For those sealed in Christ, the way to conquer is through suffering, (therefore we must repent, trust God, and fight through faithfulness)***

First, you see in v. 1-8 the theme of the “seal.” Last week Larry gave us an overview of this chapter, and showed us how this seal is the work of the Holy Spirit who himself is a guarantee that we will persevere through God's power and therefore it provides assurance. But this notion of being sealed also brings up a point of tension or maybe even confusion as we read Revelation and for that matter as we live our lives.

In the letters to the seven churches we saw over and over again that Jesus saw the churches suffering. They were: “enduring patiently and bearing up for Christ’s sake” (2:3), about to be thrown in jail and probably killed (2:10-11), remaining faithful even as they witness a church leader being killed (2:13), as we study the situation in those seven cities we know Christians were losing their livelihoods. In chapter 6:9 we heard of the martyrs who had been slain for the word of God and the witness they had borne (6:9)—and we are told their number is not yet complete (6:11). Even here in chapter 7, when we see the picture of heaven in v. 15-17 the hope of heaven is that they will be sheltered by God, will not hunger, not thirst, not be scorched by the sun, and their tears will be wiped away. So *How can it be that we who believe are “sealed in Christ” by the Holy Spirit and yet suffering?*

## **I. To Be Sealed in Christ is to be Sealed from God’s Wrath (v. 1-3).**

This image of judgment being forestalled until the servants of God have been marked on their foreheads comes Ezekiel 9:3-5

*<sup>3</sup> Now the glory of the God of Israel had gone up from the cherub on which it rested to the threshold of the house. And he called to the man clothed in linen, who had the writing case at his waist. <sup>4</sup> And the Lord said to him, “Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the*

*men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it.”<sup>5</sup> And to the others he said in my hearing, “Pass through the city after him, and strike. Your eye shall not spare, and you shall show no pity.*

The judgment of God was coming upon Israel. They were to be slaughtered by the Babylonian army, Jerusalem plundered, the Temple destroyed, and any survivors carried off into exile. But before that happens God has an angel mark a remnant—those who have grieved the wickedness of Israel—and those who had the mark are not to be killed. Interestingly these people are not exempt from pain and suffering—its not like they would have been happy that Jerusalem and their people were destroyed, God’s temple destroyed—but they are sealed and spared from God’s wrath.

I don’t know why but the metaphor that came to me when I was thinking about this is on Halloween when you turn your porch light off to signify “don’t come here.” That’s kind of like this mark on the head—it tells the angels “don’t go there.” Another example might be how under the Geneva Convention medics in the field are not to treated as combatants. But maybe the best analogy comes from the Bible itself—at the first Passover the mark of the blood of a lamb on the doorpost was the sign to the pass-over the house and spare the firstborn son. In Ezekiel the seal of safety is not on households but individuals, and they are spared.

This idea is reshaped in Revelation. There are apparently many who die for their faith, and as the book unfolds we see that not only is God's wrath being poured out on those who dwell upon the earth—but also the Dragon, the beast, and the false prophet wage war against the church. God does not promise that if you believe Jesus you'll be spared from suffering or persecution or martyrdom. The seal here is protection from God's judgment in the coming plagues (cf. 9:4) and from the final judgment.

This is because the hope of the church is not staying alive so that a remnant can survive and eventually return to the Promised Land—the hope of the church is Christ's resurrection. The hope of the church is being spared from God's judgment, ultimately from Hell which is the second death. The hope of the sealed is being raised from the dead when Christ returns.

That is what those who are in Christ are sealed for: not exemption from suffering, not a guarantee of your life being saved—a guarantee that *God will bring judgment on you*, and when Christ comes back you will be raised, and at the final judgment you will enter into eternal life—no matter what suffering or pain or even death you faced in this life. It's not just a rhetorical flourish in v. 2 when it says this is the “seal of the Living God.” He is the God who holds life and death in his hands, the God who in Christ conquered death. Life and death is not the issue, ultimately, for God. To have the seal of God on your forehead means that you have been set

apart by God under the blood of the Lamb to be protected, spared, sealed from God's wrath.

But as it turns out not sealed from suffering. In fact,

## **II. *the way to conquer is through suffering***

Now remember that the 144,000 who have been sealed are an army. In the OT whenever there is a passage like this—a census—it is because Israel is preparing for war. But this 144,000 is a symbolic representation of the church. They are the true Israel, because they are in Christ—who is himself the true Israel, the one faithful Jew, the Messiah. So put those two things together, this means the whole church is the army of God in the battle against the Dragon, the Beast, and the False Prophet.

But there's something strange about this army, and here's where we see one of those things that doesn't make sense to us. As you read Revelation it becomes clear that the suffering of the saints *is* their weapon in the battle.

### **A. *Three Connections Between Rev. 5 & 7***

Remember back to Revelation 5:5-6:

*<sup>5</sup> And one of the elders **said** to me, "Weep no more; behold, the **Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered**, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals."*

<sup>6</sup> *And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I **saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain**, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.*

	John hears "And one of the elders <b>said to me</b> " (v. 5)	John sees "And... <b>I saw</b> a Lamb" (v. 6)	John hears: And I <b>heard</b> the number of the sealed, 144,000 (v. 4)	John sees: After this I <b>looked</b> , and behold, a great multitude that no one could number (v. 9)
<b>Shift from Israel to All nations...</b>	"lion of <b>Judah</b> ...root of <b>David</b> " (v. 5)	"you ransomed people for God from every <b>tribe</b> and <b>language</b> and <b>people</b> and <b>nation</b> " (v. 9)	144,000, sealed from every <b>tribe of the sons of Israel</b> :  12,000 from the <b>tribe of Judah</b> were sealed etc. (v. 4-8)	"a great multitude that no one could number, from <b>every nation</b> , from <b>all tribes and peoples</b> and <b>languages</b> " (v. 9)
<b>Shift from Power to Sacrifice</b>	"behold, the <b>Lion of the tribe of Judah</b> , the <b>Root of David</b> , has <b>conquered</b> , so that he can open the scroll" (v. 5)	"I saw a Lamb standing, <b>as though it had been slain</b> " (v. 6)  " <b>Worthy are you to take the scroll</b> and to open its seals, <b>for you were slain</b> " (v. 9)	The army assembled for war (v. 4-8)	<b>Judah</b> is at the head of the army (v. 5, cf. 5:5)  The army includes the <b>Levites</b> (v. 7)  These are in <b>heaven</b> and so have died (v. 14)  They have washed their robes in the <b>blood of the Lamb</b> (v. 14)

1. In each passage John hears one thing, then sees something else that redefines what he heard (5:5-6, 7:4, 9)

2. In each passage this hearing and seeing shifts from Israel language to Nations language. So in chapter 5 it shifts from hearing about Christ as lion of Judah and root of David (v. 5) to seeing the lamb who ransomed a people from every nation, language, tribe, and tongue (v. 6). And in chapter 7 it shifts hearing the census of an army of Israel assembled for

war (4-8), to seeing a multitude from every nation, language, tribe, and tongue (v. 9ff).

**3.** In each passage what John hears and sees shifts from militaristic power to victory through suffering. In chapter 5 John hears titles that in his day meant a king who would conquer Israel's enemies (lion of Judah, Root of David, v. 5:5) but he sees lamb who is worthy because he was slain (5:6, 9). In chapter 7, John hears an army assembled for war (v. 4-8), but he sees a victorious multitude (v. 9) exclaiming that salvation *only* comes from God & the Lamb (v. 10), that power *only* belongs to him (v. 12), these are ones who have come out of the tribulation (v. 14), who are covered not in the blood of their enemies but of the Lamb (v. 14).

This final connection between 5 & 7 lines up with the rest of Revelation, where the crown of life is given to those faithful unto death (2:10), the redeemed 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,***” as well as chapter 14 where the 144,000 follow the Lamb wherever he goes (to death) and are described as a blameless sacrifice of firstfruits (14:4-5).

So, the weapon for the army of the Lord is suffering like Jesus, suffering for the blood of the Lamb and their testimony.

But not only is the fight redefined—victory is redefined. Here



## **B. What it means too Conquer is to be faithful to Christ**

In v. 9, the multitude wear white robes and wave palm branches—both symbols of victory. And they cry out “salvation to our God and to the Lamb” because the lamb has *already conquered*.

And yet these are the ones who have come out the great tribulation—they have experienced worldly defeat.

The history of the church is likewise filled with the stories of people who were willing to suffer for what was right, and true, for the cause of Christ in the world.

Consider Basilides and Potamiaena, (Book 6 of Eusebius of Caesarea’s *Church History*). Potamiaena was a young Christian woman tortured to death during the reign of Maximian. One of her guards, Basilides, befriended her during her imprisonment. Potamiaena prayed for him before she died. Three days after Potamiaena’s death, Basilides had a vision in which the young woman visited him and placed a wreath on his head. God brought Basilides to faith, and after being baptized, he went to authorities to tell them he was a Christian and was beheaded.

Or on a bigger scale, how is it that the faith of a few dozen Jews confessing the risen Christ became the official religion of the most powerful empire in the world within 300 years? Was it by power, resources, and strength of arms? Or was it because—though certainly not every Christian is martyred—

the church understood that suffering was what it meant to fight as God's army, and conquering meant faithfulness to Christ rather than "worldly success." And they did conquer by protecting the poor, caring for the sick, adopting the orphans, and remaining faithful unto death. The love of God through Jesus Christ conquered Rome through the faithful witness of the church.

It seems to me that many in the Church have bought into the lie the power, resources, and strength of arms is the path to victory—and perhaps they have done so because we have missed what Revelation (and Jesus, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter, James, and the author of Hebrews) have to say about what victory, what conquering means for those in Christ.

Faithfulness to Christ, not worldly success, is what it means for the Christian to conquer, and ***the way to conquer is through suffering.***

So, we see that ***For those sealed in Christ, the way to conquer is through suffering***

### **III. Application**

#### **A. Political Rhetoric**

There is a very obvious application here as to how a Christian ought to engage in politics. It seems to me that Christians as much as anyone else have bought into the lie that wealth, power, and strength of arms are the answer to

our personal problems, our nation's problems and the world's problems. We very often base our political convictions on the definition of victory or conquering as worldly success. Now I understand that there isn't always a straight line from Jesus's teaching to a political policy—but that doesn't excuse Christians from nuanced thinking about issues, nor from trying to understand and work together with those who disagree, nor from refusing to play by the party-line politics that so polarizes the church today.

Foreign policy, health care, immigration, and gun control are not zero sum games. Not every issue is kill or be killed. Surely the Risen Christ proves that suffering or apparent failure need not be the final word? And in any event, isn't Revelation calling us to faithfulness not worldly success?

## **B. Racism**

Another application of conquering suggests itself more directly from the text. Look at v. 9 again: the multitude, the army of God, those redeemed by the blood of the Lamb are from “every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.”

What do you think that means?

The church of God do not all speak the same language, they are not all from the same cultural background, they do not share the same complexion.

You've probably heard the cliché that Sunday is the most segregated day of the week. But it's true, and our world remains deeply divided over race and ethnicity. We harbor prejudices, stereotypes, and we are so often content to be around, to be in relationship to, to worship alongside only those who look like us ethnically, racially, even socially. But the church of God, fighting as God's army in the world must be willing to suffer, to be uncomfortable, to be faithful to their Savior.

I alluded to this Scripture at the start of our time together, Ephesians 3:8-10.

*<sup>8</sup> To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, <sup>9</sup> and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, <sup>10</sup> so that through the church the **manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.***

The mystery of the Gospel to which Paul refers here is that God has reconciled Jews and Gentiles—ethnic pride being a fundamental expression of sin in the world—reconciled them to himself and to one another. And the way he puts the rulers and authorities, those evil spiritual powers, on notice that their days are numbered is through the church. Christ

died to make one new man out of two and he has called us to be a army for reconciliation in the world.

### ***How Can We Do it?***

I think it should be obvious from the tone of this message, and of this passage, that we can't be an fight as God's army, or persevere through suffering, or change the way we engage in politics, or make significant strides against racism without the power of God in the Gospel. There are many attitudes of the heart that will inhibit us, but the Gospel is the answer to them all.

### **Pride:**

Matthew 23:12

Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Ephesians 2:8-9

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may ***boast***.

### **Greed (obsession with security and comfort)**

2 Corinthians 8:9

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.

## **Fear:**

Romans 8:15

You did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’”

What is there to fear?

Though we may suffer as we seek to live faithfully, we are sealed from wrath and our future is secure:

*And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*

*<sup>15</sup> “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.*

*<sup>16</sup> They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.*

*<sup>17</sup> 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.”*

Amen.