

Sermon – 06/05/2007 am

Sealing of the Servants of God

Study Text: Revelation 7:1-3

Six of the seven seals on the scroll have been opened. Only Jesus, the slain Lamb, was found worthy to open these seals and reveal the purposes of God. As he opened the first four seals, four horsemen went forth to conquer and kill, to bring famine and pestilence on the earth. The sixth seal brought darkness and death to those who exalt themselves against God and persecute his servants. The sixth chapter ends with the declaration *the great day of God's wrath has come, and who can stand?*

We come to seventh chapter expecting an answer to this question. It is of course a rhetorical question. No one can stand against the wrath of the Lamb. It is paradoxical having a Lamb that is mighty and powerful striking fear into the heart of men. But this is the Lamb of God who was victorious, even over the power of death.

The ultimate power of evil is death, but the Lamb of God has conquered death itself. He has been given all authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18), and been granted to sit on the throne in heaven. All his enemies flee from his face and indeed will be crushed when he comes in all his glory.

The other question before us is what about the people of God. The cry of the martyrs under the altar has gone up. They are told to rest a little while. What happens to the saints on earth during this outpouring of the wrath of God (assuming you do not think they have all been raptured)?

Standing

This chapter is an interlude between the 'seal judgments' and the coming 'trumpet judgments'. It begins with the words *after these things*, and we might think that we are moving on in a chronological manner through history. But this is not the case. Read again the opening words. *After these things I saw*. After seeing what he recorded in chapter six John sees something else.

What he sees in this chapter actually parallels, rather than follows on from, what he saw in chapter six. He saw the outpouring of God's wrath from a different perspective. He saw what happens to the saints in the Judgment.

John saw four angels holding the four winds of the earth (7:1). These were ready to blow on the earth, the sea and the trees, and bring harm. Is this not what we saw the four horsemen doing? These four winds of the earth parallel the four horsemen, or may even represent the same thing. We do not see four living creatures saying 'come' to evil horsemen, but four angels holding back the forces of evil – at least until saints are sealed.

These four angels are **standing** (7:1), and later in this chapter we see the saints **standing** before the throne in heaven. What was the question – who can **stand**? John saw angels and

saints standing as the wrath of God was poured out. Such a vision would have been comforting to the persecuted Christians in the first century – and even today.

Take up the armour of God that you may be able to stand in the evil day, and having done all to stand (Ephesians 6:13). Is this what you seek to do – to stand firm in the truth of the Lord Jesus Christ, knowing that he is able to keep you standing?

John saw another angel coming up out of the east. It was this angel who told the other four to hold back the destructive winds. He was obviously an angel with authority. He was an angel sent to seal the servants of God. He was carrying the seal of the living God (7:3).

Seal

Seals are not unknown to us today. The other day I bought something which was sealed with a label saying ‘do not accept this product if seal is broken’. The maker put this seal on his product as a guarantee to the buyer. In the old days – and still today in India – documents sent by post were sealed with wax. Only the addressee was allowed to open this mail. If the wax seal was broken the person knew that his documents, his personal property, had been tampered with.

John saw the scroll with seven seals in his heavenly vision. Only the Lamb of God was qualified to open these seals. In this vision he saw the angel with the seal of the living God (7:2). We might have expected this angel to be coming down from heaven – but he is a coming up from the east, in what may be another parody. What was the nature and purpose of this seal?

In Ezekiel we read of a man clothed in linen who went through Jerusalem putting a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over the detestable things done there (Ezekiel 9:4). This is the Old Testament background to what John saw. He saw an angel coming to seal the servants of God on their foreheads.

We are not told what the nature of this seal was until 14:1 which reads *having his Father's name written on their foreheads*. Over-comers in the church at Philadelphia were told *I will write on him the name of my God and of the city of my God* (3:12). The seal of the beast was a mark, name or number (13:17).

The servants of God were to be sealed on their foreheads (7:3). I remember times on the farm when we mustered and branded all the cows. Long branding irons, with the initials *JM*, were heated in the fire and jabbed onto the animal's rump. This was done to slaves years ago. It is just 200 years since slavery was outlawed in western nations. But slaves were very much part of society in New Testament times. We have one whole book of the Bible written about a slave and his master.

A mark on the forehead could not easily be hidden. A brand was very effective as a seal because it could not be removed. It was like circumcision, the sign and seal God gave to the Jews. It could not be removed. Hitler could distinguish the Jews because of this mark.

The seal on a slave was a mark of ownership. He was the property of the one who bought him. The owner could claim the one with his mark as his slave, just as God can claim the one he seals as his own.

Most slave owners treated their slaves well. They wanted them to work, so fed them and looked after them. Some slaves did not want to leave when given their freedom. The seal of their owner was a comfort, a security to them. So the seal of God means protection for his servants. They can claim they belong to God because they bear his seal.

Does all this mean anything to us today? Do we have anything to mark us as believers? Do we have any seal from God? It does not of course mean that a Christian should wear certain jewellery or special clothing to distinguish themselves! That may be what other religions do, but it is not what we learn from the Bible.

Jesus told his disciples *by this shall all men now that you are my disciples-if you have love one for another* (John 12:35). Love for one another should mark out Christians from other people. Is this how people know that you are a Christian? Are you a forgiving and loving person?

Sacraments

What about a seal from God? Does God seal his servants today? Do you have a seal on your forehead that says you belong to God? No! But you do have a seal in your heart that tells you that you belong to God. And if you are walking in the Spirit that seal will be evident to all. Yes, all believers are given the Holy Spirit as a seal from God.

Now he who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, is God, who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee (II Corinthians 1:21, 22). And again in Ephesians we read – *in whom also having believed you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession* (Ephesians 1:13). The Holy Spirit is given by God, not bought and not earned (*cf* Acts 8), just as the servants are sealed by the angel of God.

The Bible speaks of two sacraments which are ‘holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace’ as our confession tells us (Westminster Confession of Faith XXVII). Baptism is the first of these sacraments. Let us be clear about baptism. It is not the same as christening or giving a name, if that is what is meant by that term. There are those who foolishly think that they have power to make Christians by pouring water on them, or dunking them in water.

‘Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament ordained by Christ, not only for solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church but also to be unto them a sign and seal of the covenant of grace’. Unbelievers have no right to be baptized, nor the children of unbelievers.

The second, and only other, sacrament is that of the Lord’s Supper. The Westminster Confession of Faith says the Lord’s Supper is to be ‘observed by the church until the end of the world for perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of himself in his death; the sealing of all benefits thereof unto true believers, their spiritual nourishment and growth in him’. The Lord’s Supper reminds us of sealing by ‘the seal of the living God’, of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Again it is only for believers. Dire consequences are promised to unbelievers who partake of this sacrament.

But this should not discourage believers from partaking of, and enjoying the benefits of, this sacrament. Those who neglect this sacrament are liable to neglect the death of Christ for their own salvation. They become spiritually anorexic, weak and ineffective Christians.

All believers are servants/slaves of God and should not be ashamed of being sealed by God. John wrote to encourage persecuted Christians. Do you find these words encouraging? The seal of God will lead to suffering (13:16 denied the right to buy and sell), and even death, but it means that such people will always stand before the throne of God in heaven.

Sealed servants of God will escape the wrath of the Lamb of God that is coming soon upon this earth. Do not fear global warming. Do not fear terrorism and war. *Do not fear those who kill the body but fear him who after he has killed has the power to cast into hell. Yes I say to you fear him* (Luke 12:5). This is the word of the Lord.

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