

Sermon – 27/05/2007 am

Who are the Ones Sealed?

Study Text: Revelation 7:4-12

Even before he died and rose again Jesus spoke about his return from heaven. *When the Son of man comes in his glory and all the holy angels with him then he will sit on the throne of his glory* (Matthew 25:31). In the book of Revelation John saw Jesus sitting on the throne in heaven ready to return in judgment. When he returns he will gather all the nations, he will gather all the living and the dead, and separate them from one another.

How will Jesus separate the people? How many groups will there be – one, two, three, or more. Many people are not sure. Some think there will be just one group because all will be saved in the end. Others think there will be three groups or more. Some teach that there will be the Jews, Gentile believers, and unbelievers. Others teach that there will one group of super Christians (like ‘us’ – Mark 9:38f), another group of not-so-good Christians, and then the non-Christians.

Jesus said he will separate people *as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats*. There will just two groups, those who believe, and those who do not believe. There will be the children of God and the children of Satan; and many who call themselves Jews will be among the latter group according to Jesus (John 8). The book of Revelation does not teach anything different despite the effort of some to interpret it in such a manner.

I heard the number – 144,000

It seems strange to focus our attention upon a number, but this number has led to many weird and wonderful ideas and prophecies. Charles Russell of Jehovah’s Witness fame declared that Christ would return in 1914 because the number of JW’s had reached this magic number. Nowadays they say that it is the number of an elite spiritual class. JW’s are not the only one to take this number literally.

Let us remember that this is a vision, an apocalypse, and that the numbers in this vision are symbolic. We naturally tend to read them literally, and some say we should do so unless impossible to do so; but as Barnett writes ‘to ignore the symbolism of the Revelation is to destroy its message and invite weird interpretations’.

So we do not take the number 144,000 literally, but what about the people who make up this number. They are said to be *of all the tribes of the children of Israel*, and then the tribes are listed with 12,000 coming from each tribe. Are ethnic Jews the only ones who are sealed? If the church has been raptured then only Jews and pagans are on the earth anyway –and this is what some understand. But note that this is not a proper list of the sons of Israel. Dan is missing. Manasseh is in, but where is Ephraim. This list differs from that found in Genesis 49 and Ezekiel 48.

Barnett says of this list; ‘the point John is making is that godly Hebrews under the Old Covenant enjoy the eternal protection of God and are at no disadvantage compared to believers under the New Covenant’. This is an interesting twist because many read these

verses as pointing to a distinct advantage for the Jews. After all they are the ones who are sealed, and the only ones sealed if we take this literally – although there is a great multitude from all nations before the throne as we will see shortly.

In the Old Testament a census was taken of Israel at various times, especially when setting out in battle. The Lord told Moses to number every male twenty and over- all who are able to go to war (Numbers 1:3). This may well be the Old Testament background to the census we find here in Revelation 7. Revelation goes on to picture war between Christ and Satan (Revelation 19). In fact John saw the 144,000 standing with Christ as if ready for battle in Revelation 14.

The number 144,000 is a very large number which is complete or fixed. The martyrs were told to rest a little while till the number of servants was completed (6:11). One thousand symbolises a large number, while 144 is the product of 12 and 12. What does the number 12 symbolise? We have already come across this in the vision of heaven where 24 elders surrounded the throne. We concluded that they represented the 12 tribes of the Old Covenant and the 12 apostles of the New Covenant.

Looking forward to Revelation 21 we see a clear picture of both the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles symbolising the gates and foundations of the holy city, the New Jerusalem. In Ephesians 2:19 the apostles are spoken of as the foundation of the church which comprises *the saints and members of God's household*. Consequently the 144,000 can be understood as representing a certain number, a large number known only to God, drawn for the Old Covenant and New Covenant who are sealed by God as his people and protected from the coming wrath of the Lamb.

I Looked and Saw Great Multitude

To summarise thus far – John saw an angel telling the four other angels to hold back the destructive winds (or horsemen) until he had sealed the servants of God on their foreheads. He then **heard** the number of those sealed – 144,000 (7:4). When he **looked** he saw a great multitude from all nations, tribes, people and tongues standing before the throne and before the Lamb (7:9).

Remember how John was told that the Lion of the tribe of Judah had prevailed, and then when he looked he saw a Lamb (5:5-6)? We have a similar pattern here. He heard something, then he saw something else, but they pointed to the same thing. The great multitude he saw standing before the throne are clothed in white robes so must be servants of God, and if servants then sealed, and if sealed then the same as the 144,000.

Such a conclusion maintains the clear truth of the Bible that there are only two groups of people – 'those who are with me and those who are against me' as Jesus said. In Revelation there are only two categories – those sealed by God, and those with the seal of Satan.

This is also consistent with Biblical teaching regarding the church. There is only one true church (not to be confused with denominations). Christians are seen as true Jews (Romans 2:26) and the church as 'the Israel of God' (Galatians 6:16, James 1:1). *They are not all Israel who are Israel* (Romans 9:6). Some Jews in the cities where John ministered were of the synagogue of Satan (3:9).

John looked and saw this great multitude. He saw people clothed in white robes, presumably the same white robes given to the martyrs (6:11), the robe of victory. They were also carrying palm branches. These were carried by the people of God as they rejoiced before the Lord in the Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:40). We see them doing this when Jesus came into Jerusalem riding on a donkey on so-called Palm Sunday. Rejoicing, rejoicing in the Lord for his victory, was celebrated by waving palm branches.

The white-robed multitude are rejoicing because *salvation belongs to our God...and to the Lamb* (7:10). They recognise the Lamb as the author and perfecter of their faith. They are saved by the grace of God alone. They join in the heavenly worship with the elders and the four living creatures. We are taken back to the throne room of chapters 4 and 5. The song they are singing is the same as it was before, a song giving praise and glory to God alone.

This scene is vastly different to what is happening on the earth. As death and destruction come upon the inhabitants of the earth, the sealed of God are safe and sound in the presence of God. God is their refuge. He will keep his servants though the time of tribulation. The Christians in the seven churches of Asia were going through great tribulation, but as the sealed servants of God they could be assured that God would keep them safe. Death is not defeat but victory for God's people.

The churches to which John wrote were small and insignificant. With so much pressure from the world many were compromising their faith. The rulers and the 'earth dwellers' thought the church would end soon. It has been the same down through history. Many have sought to destroy the church of God. Persecution, false teaching, divisions and every other means has been tried, but the church continues. It continues because it is the church of God. It continues because the people of God are not isolated individuals but belong to a great multitude which no one can number.

Do you walk in fear of men? Do you walk in fear of the things of this world? Many are predicting widespread environmental destruction with dire consequences for mankind. Is this what you fear? Or do you fear some cosmic catastrophe? Do you fear poverty? Do you fear death? 'Fear not' said Jesus 'I have overcome the world'.

'Safe in the arms of Jesus' I read on a tombstone the other day. It is not a Bible verse but it is a Bible truth. And it is a truth not just for the dead but for the living. It is a truth for you today. If you are sealed you belong to that great multitude which no one can number.

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