

FOLLOWING CHRIST IN A
FRIGHTENING WORLD:
THE LAST ONES STANDING

Revelation 7:1-8

February 6, 2000---Dr. Mark James Toone
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

The way to remember chapter 6 in Revelation is to remember "six seals." In John's heavenly vision, we join him in watching as the Lamb of God takes the scroll of human destiny from the one who sits on the throne. That scroll is sealed with seven seals and only the Lamb is worthy to break open those seals and unleash the events that are contained therein. Quickly the Lamb breaks the first four seals. Out gallop the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Tyranny, Warfare, Famine and Death.

Seal five is broken and we hear the cry of the martyrs from beneath the altar, those who were slain for their devotion to Jesus. Seal six is broken and nature begins to fall apart at the seams. Earthquakes, asteroids, volcanoes perhaps. We hear some more cries, this time from the ungodly. They cry out for the mountains to bury them so that they won't need to face the wrath of the one who sits on the throne. Suddenly they get it. Suddenly they realize that the God who has held back his hand of judgement has had enough. It is fearful think for them to discover that they are on the wrong side of the judgement of Almighty God.

Chapter six closes with this powerful question: "The great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" Who indeed? In a world that is being overrun by tyranny, warfare, famine, death, religious persecution and natural disaster...who can possibly remain standing when the whole world is falling down around our ears. Well, quite a few folks, as it turns out. (Read)

If chapter 6 can be remembered by "six seals," remember chapter 7 this way: 7 for Sabbath. In chapter 7, a great Sabbath ...a great rest ...comes upon this cataclysm. Revelation 7 may be the most gracious of the chapters in this book. Because in the midst of worldwide destruction and calamity, God says, "Hold everything! Stop right where you are! Chapter six was the opening of the first six seals. Chapter 8 is the opening of the

seventh seal. But chapter 7 is Sabbath. Rest. Everything comes to a screeching halt. Do you see it?

The chapter opens with four angels at the four corners of the world. What are they doing? Holding back four winds. Winds of destruction. Chapter six ended with nature coming apart at the seams. These winds are part of nature. Left to themselves, they could bring further havoc to the earth.

In the Middle East, winds are vicious. Because there are no trees in many places. No protection. The hot, biting winds that blow through there carry the grit of sandpaper. I know. On one of my trips to Israel, I was trying to serve communion in the Garden Tomb when one of these siroccos struck. Sand was everywhere. We couldn't keep our eyes open. We could hardly hold on to the elements. It was a mess.

Imagine those kinds of winds on a world-wide, ferocious level. But God's angels restrain them. Suddenly, nature gets quiet. The winds are stilled on land and sea. Sabbath. Rest.

Then another angel appears and gives instructions to the first four angels. "Don't let any more harm come to the land or sea or trees." We have this wonderful image of God's restraint. Even though it appears that the world is out of control, that evil has the final word, in fact, God is very much in control. The Sovereign Lord of chapter 6 has called a stop to the devastation.

Why? Because he has something very important to do. He has some sealing to do. Wait a second, we might say. I thought we were Unsealing. Aren't we in the process of breaking open the seals that lock the scroll so we can read the scroll of human destiny? Yet here, in the interlude between the breaking of the sixth and seventh seals, we discover God's seal being placed on something.

Do you see this? This belongs to my son, Cooper. He calls it his Moses ring. Every king and ruler at the time of John had a signet ring. His seal. It might have his name inscribed on it in reverse lettering. When he dictated a letter or law, after it was written down, hot wax would be dripped on the parchment and the king would place his ring into the wax, marking it and sealing it.

The seal provided two purposes. It declared ownership. When a king placed his seal on something, he was declaring, "This is mine. These words, this law, this letter...this belongs to me." It also protected the document. No one would dare break the seal of the king unless they were authorized to do so. Remember chapter 5 in the heavenly throne room? That's why no one could open the scroll. Because no one was worthy to break the seals of the one who sat upon the throne. So, the seal protected the contents.

But there is something unusual here. Normally, seals were used for scrolls or books. But not here. It is not a document that is being sealed. What is it? People. 144,000 of them. They are called servants of God and they have a mark placed on their forehead.

There is great controversy about the meaning of this 144,000. Some take this number literally, particularly the Jehovah's Witnesses. They believe that only the 144,000 most worthy will make it to heaven. When you see them at your door selling you *Watchtower*, you should understand that they consider this a matter of eternal consequence. Somehow, by their good deeds, they have got to make the short list. Or they won't get into heaven. Can you imagine the pressure? The competition?

Not surprisingly, I believe this is exactly wrong. Remember what I said about numbers in Revelation. They are symbolic. This number, 144,000, is a combination of numbers. It is 12 times 12. Twelve tribes of Israel, twelve apostles...who knows. But twelve was another important number, like 7. It represented completeness. And, it was 12 times 12 times 1000 which is another way of saying a really, really big number of completeness.

John counts 12,000 out of twelve different tribes. Interestingly, this is not an accurate list as found in the Old Testament. Judah is first, not Reuben who was the eldest. Why? Judah was the tribe of Jesus. Normally, Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, were listed together. Manasseh is listed and Joseph is listed. And Joseph is listed. But no Ephraim. And Dan is deleted altogether.

All of this is to say, I do not accept a common interpretation of this text which says that this represents the return of the Jewish nation to Christ. I think this represents the new Israel, the church of Jesus Christ. It is an Israel that transcends tribes and tongues and ethnicity. It is an Israel that includes all kinds of persons. The one criterion is this: they are the faithful followers of Christ.

Our Jehovah's Witnesses friends interpret this number to mean that ONLY 144,000 will be saved. I believe the intent is to show that God calls a halt to the destruction of the world long enough to place his stamp...his stamp of ownership ...his stamp of protection ...upon every single one his children...without limitation...before the final great plagues strike.

Where does this idea come from? First, I think it is drawn from the story of the Exodus. Do you remember the Passover? When the angel of death was preparing to go through Egypt and visit the final plague, the death of every first born son, the people were told how to protect themselves. Do you remember? They were to slay a sacrificial lamb and spread its blood on the lintel and door post of their home. Every house that was "sealed" in the blood of the sacrificial lamb would be spared. Everyone that was not would be struck by death.

But there is another, less familiar image, that is drawn from Ezekiel 9. In the prophecy of Ezekiel 9, the people of Israel have turned to idolatry. God is furious with them. He orders six guards to go into the city and destroy all those who have bowed down to idols. But before he does that, he does something else. He calls forth a man clothed in linen with a writing kit. He tells this man with the writing kit to go into the city and put an ink mark on the forehead of everyone who grieves because the people have turned their backs on God. The soldiers are to follow him. Whoever has the ink mark on their forehead, the soldiers are to spare. But anyone without the ink mark is to be slain.

In chapter 7, all of this wonderful imagery comes together. The sovereign God calls a halt to the devastation of the world long enough to place his seal upon his children. A seal that will identify them as his own. A seal that will protect them from the God-separating effects of the evil that is ranging over the world.

Chapter 7 is a gracious Sabbath rest that reminds us of our security as God's children.

I want to return one more time to the passage in Ezekiel. Remember I told you that the man in linen was ordered by God to go into the city and put a mark on the forehead of everyone who was still faithful to God. The mark that he was told to put on that forehead was a Tav. Do you know what a Tav looked like when it was drawn free hand? It was a cross.

Did you know that you have been sealed, too? No, it is not a mark on your forehead. Listen to what Paul says in Ephesians 1: "In Christ you were also chosen ...when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession---to the praise of his glory."

Who can stand in the face of a world that is coming apart at the seams? Who will be the last one standing? The believer in Jesus will be. The one who is marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit. That seal declares ownership. Jesus looks upon us and says, "You belong to me." And that seal promises protection. No matter what we might face, there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Communion-blood of the lamb at Passover.

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS THE LAST ONES STANDING *Revelation 7:1-8*

*Pastor Mark Toone
February 6, 2000*

- *Pastor Mark suggests you memorize the theme of chapter 7 with the aid "7 equals Sabbath." How does this chapter represent a "Sabbath rest" from what we have been experiencing in chapter 6 and will see again in chapter 8? How is God shown to be restraining the evil forces that will unwittingly become the agents of his destruction?*
- *Why does God call a halt to the destruction? What is he doing? How is the imagery of "seal" carried from chapter 6 to chapter 7? How is it similar? How is it different? What does the idea of "sealing" mean, anyway? If the seal represented ownership and protection, what are the implications for those who receive God's seal? Does protection mean safety from persecution? Explain.*
- *Read the last verse of chapter 6. How does chapter 7 answer that question?*

Read Ephesians 1:11-14. What is the seal that has been placed upon us? In what way is that seal a deposit? What will we claim later?