

BITTER HONEY: THE REVELATION

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CHAPTER 7: THE PROMISE SEALED

As the sixth seal was opened, God's wrath was poured out on the earth. God's judgment brought terror and enormous suffering. Now in love, God added Revelation 7. This chapter was designed to comfort the church by describing her deliverance. Then in chapters 8-9, God would describe His judgment in greater detail.

Verses 1-3

John saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth. These four angels were holding back the four winds from blowing on the earth, the sea, and the trees. These angels may have been the four cherubim from Revelation 6:1-8. These angels were given authority to call forth man's empires. In Revelation 6:1-8, the cherubim called forth Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. The angels in Revelation 7 were holding back man's final empire, the new Rome. Revelation 9:14-15 would promise that God had decreed the hour, day, month, and year when these angels would release the new Rome.

The cherubim may have been standing at the four corners of the earth because Israel was in exile. God's people had been scattered by the four winds to the four corners of the earth. The symbols of four winds and four corners were not uncommon in Scripture. In Jeremiah 49:36, God promised to bring the four winds against Elam from the four ends of heaven. Then the men of Elam would be driven to every nation. These winds also exiled Israel. God promised that one day He would bring His people home from the four winds and from the four corners of the earth (Ezekiel 37:9; Isaiah 11:12). These prophecies pointed to Israel's return from exile. God would also gather His people from the four winds when Christ would return (Matthew 24:31).

The cherubim were holding back to four winds so that they could not blow on the earth, the sea or the trees. The most immediate Old Testament source for this verse was probably Daniel 7:2. Daniel saw four world empires arise while four winds were stirring up the great sea. When the four winds would blow once more, man's last empire would arise. The four winds were specifically prevented from blowing on the earth, the sea, or the trees. These symbols pointed to the destruction of the last days. The first two trumpets in Revelation 8:7-8 would destroy the earth, the sea, and the trees. When the four winds were released, the seven trumpets would sound. The mixed nations would end as "Babylon" fell and Rome was re-established.

In Revelation 7:2, John saw another angel ascending from the rising sun. This angel had the seal of God. He commanded the four cherubim not to harm the earth until He had sealed the bondservants of God on their foreheads. The angel may have been a symbol for Christ who sealed His people with the Holy Spirit. Christ may have ascended from the rising sun because of verses like Malachi 4:2 and Isaiah 8:20. When Christ returned, the sun of righteousness would arise with healing in his wings. Then God's people would have their dawn.

Christ may have appeared in verse 2 because verses 1-3 were a parallel to Ezekiel 9. Ezekiel saw Christ standing among six destroying men. Like the four winds of heaven of verse 1, the six executioners may have symbolized the empires that destroyed Israel. In Ezekiel, Christ went through Jerusalem, placing a mark on the foreheads of those who groaned over Israel's abominations. The six executioners followed after Christ, and killed everyone who was not sealed on his forehead. In Revelation 7:1-3, Christ also commanded Israel's executioners not to harm the land until He had sealed the bondservants of God. Then the world empires would again be loosed to destroy the earth.

Why would God place His mark on their foreheads? The seal of God may have been a mark of verification. In the Old Testament world people used wax seals on documents to verify that they belonged to the author of the document (I Kings 21:8; Esther 8:8). Paul used these wax seals as symbols in Romans 4:11 and I Corinthians 9:2. Paul claimed that Abraham's circumcision was a seal of the righteousness

which he had before he was circumcised. Later, Paul added that the Corinthians were the seal of his apostleship. They showed the reality of his call from God. Perhaps those who entered Christ's presence bore his name to verify that they did belong to Him. The seal of God may not have been a visible mark. Paul said that the Ephesians were sealed by and through the Holy Spirit of promise (Ephesians 1:13; 4:30). God's seal may have been the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of God's children (II Corinthians 1:22). The Spirit's baptism was the seal that the Father placed on Christ (John 6:27). The Holy Spirit's presence would demonstrate the authenticity of His peoples' faith far better than a visible mark.

The seal of God paralleled the mark of the beast. Both marks were on the forehead. God's seal may have been grounded in Exodus 28:36. When Aaron came into God's presence, he wore a golden seal on his forehead. This seal contained the words, "Holy to the Lord." God's people were also commanded in Deuteronomy 11:18 to bind His word on their hands and foreheads. Revelation would later divide everyone into two groups: those who had the seal of God on their foreheads, and those who had the mark of the beast.

Revelation 14:1 and 22:4 promised that those who came into Christ's presence would have His name written on their foreheads. In Revelation 14:1, John was describing the 144,000 who were about to be sealed in Revelation 7:4-8. So the seal of Revelation 7 meant that Christ's people had entered His presence and had received His name on their foreheads. Those who entered Christ's presence were the martyrs of Revelation 6:9-11. In Revelation 6:11, these martyrs were told to rest until the complete number of their fellow martyrs were killed. As Revelation 7 continued, these martyrs would now be numbered.

Verses 4-8

John heard the number of those who were sealed. There were 12,000 from each of Israel's 12 tribes, for a total of 144,000. Then Revelation listed each tribe from which the sealed had come. The significance of this list has often been overlooked. The list of tribes in Revelation 7 was completely different from any other list of tribes in the Bible. How was it different? There were not really 12 tribes in Israel. There were 13 tribes because Joseph's two sons Ephraim and Manasseh each became a large tribe. When the Old Testament created lists of 12 tribes, the tribe of Levi was sometimes omitted because it had received no land inheritance. Other lists combined the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh into the tribe of Joseph. Rev 7 said that 12,000 had been sealed from Levi, Joseph, and Manasseh. In all of Scripture, only one list arrived at 12 tribes by omitting a different tribe. John listed no one as being sealed from the tribe of Dan.

Revelation 7 may have listed all 12 tribes in order to show that Dan was not among them. John may have been using the tribe of Dan as a symbol. This symbol could be understood by reading the descriptions of Dan in the Old Testament. Throughout Scripture, Dan was the extremity of Israel. The most common description of the whole land of Palestine was "from Dan to Beersheba" (Judges 20:1). Beersheba was the beginning of the land. Abraham and Isaac had both lived there (Genesis 22:19; 26:33; 28:10). Dan was the end of the Promised Land. So Moses saw the land as far as Dan before he died (Deuteronomy 34:1). In Ezekiel 48:1, Dan was promised an inheritance on the northern extremity of the Promised Land. So even in the New Earth, Dan would be the far end of Israel. Dan was geographically the farthest part of Israel.

Dan was also the last part of Israel in other ways. In the wilderness, the camp of Dan was the last camp to set out against an enemy (Numbers 2:31). Numbers 10:25 said that the camp of Dan formed Israel's rear guard. Then in Joshua 19:40-48, Dan was the last tribe to receive its inheritance. After all of the other tribes had received their lands, the final lot fell to Dan. In Revelation 7, Israel's tribes had been destroyed by the world's empires and had entered Christ's presence. These tribes were waiting for the judgment and were beginning to receive their reward. Through the whole New Testament age, the Jews

were scattered in exile and in unbelief. However, the tribe of Dan was not yet sealed. Revelation 7 may have implied that a group of Jews would still arise to set out against man's empire. Like a voice of judgment from Dan, these Jews would be Israel's rear guard. They would be the last to set out in battle, and the last to receive their reward. Then God would vindicate His people as He had vindicated Rachel when she named a son Dan (Genesis 30:6).

Verses 4-8 gave the number of those who had been sealed, and the number was 144,000. The number may have been a symbol representing the Old Testament believing community. The symbolic use of this number may resemble other passages in Revelation. In Revelation 21:16, John saw the New Jerusalem on Mount Zion. John said that the city had a wall that was 144 cubits thick. It was 12,000 stadia long, wide, and high. 144 cubits would be roughly 72 yards. While this would be quite a thick wall, the measurement would not be at all impossible. 12,000 stadia would be 1,500 miles. A wall 1,500 miles square would also not be impossible, although it could only with difficulty sit on a mountain in Palestine. However, the wall was also described as being 1,500 miles high. Such a tall wall would be at least highly unusual since it would stretch far into space. This suggests that the number 12,000 may have been a symbol instead of a literal description. The number may have pointed to the complete Old Testament community since the numbers 12 and 1,000 were often used to describe a complete community or a complete time period. Ezekiel saw the same city in Ezekiel 48:30-35. Ezekiel's city was only 4,500 cubits square. These dimensions could fit much more easily on the top of a mountain.

Verses 9-17

In Revelation 7:9, John finished numbering the martyrs who would die for Christ. In verses 4-8, John saw the martyred Old Testament community. John was told that a tribe of Israel would later arise to oppose man's empire. Then in verse 9, John saw a great multitude from every nation standing before God's throne. These may have been the sealed New Testament church. They were clothed in white robes which the martyrs had received in Revelation 6:11. These came victorious out of the great tribulation. The antichrist would martyr the New Testament church. Those who overcame would serve God in His temple and would praise Him with a loud voice.

Verses 15-17 summarized God's promises to these martyrs. When Christ returned in judgment, they would rise from the dead and would live with Him. John promised that they would not hunger or thirst. The sun would not beat down on them or any heat. The Lamb would be their Shepherd, and He would guide them to springs of living water. Then God would wipe away every tear from their eyes. The sun would not beat down on Mount Zion because God would place over it the pillar of cloud and fire that had led Israel through the wilderness. Isaiah promised this with the words, "then the Lord will create over the whole area of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, even smoke, and the brightness of a flaming fire by night, for over all the glory will be a canopy. And there will be a shelter to give shade from the heat by day and refuge and protection from the storm and rain" (Isaiah 4:5-6). Isaiah also promised that Christ would wipe away all tears (Isaiah 24:8), and that He would guide His people to springs of water (Isaiah 49:10).

The springs of living water speak about the freshness of the New Earth (Joel 3:18). However, the springs also point to Christ's presence in the hearts of His people (Jeremiah 17:13; John 7:38; I Corinthians 12:13). In these few verses, John summed up almost everything that can be known about life in the New Earth. This section ended with the first verse in chapter 8. Christ broke the seventh seal, and there was silence in heaven for half an hour. John was looking forward to the day when all heaven and earth would be silent before God. The opening of the seventh seal should be the end of chapter 7 because that seal was Christ's final message of comfort. After the suffering, sin would be put away. Then Christ's people would enter their rest.