

The great multitude

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Date: 09 August 2020

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[0 : 0 0] now in a moment Fumi is going to read our passage and after that Andy Meadows our youth and children's assistant minister will preach but before Fumi reads let's pray together our loving heavenly father as we hear your word read and explained now please give us open eyes ears and hearts that we might hear you speaking to us and put what we hear into practice in Jesus name Amen Fumi After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth holding back the four winds of the earth that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun with the seal of the living God and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea saying do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads and I heard the number of the sealed 144,000 sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel

Twelve thousand from the tribe of Judah were sealed Twelve thousand from the tribe of Levi, 12,000 from the tribe of Issachar, 12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun, 12,000 from the tribe of Joseph, 12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed.

After this, I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes, and peoples, and languages, standing before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb. And all the angels were standing around the throne, and around the elders, and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne, and worshipped God, saying, Amen, blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen.

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come? I said to him, Sir, you know. 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.

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. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more. The sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. 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. When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

[3 : 4 8] Good morning, everyone. It's great to be back. Great to see you all. For number four, of our series in Revelation. Hopefully, you have a handout printed off and to hand on the screen to follow along. It's pretty simple. So that will just help us to get our bearings.

Well, let me start with a question. How will it all end? That's the big question of our time when thinking about the future. COVID, Brexit, exam results this week and next, returning to school. How will it all end? We look around and see all the uncertainties in the world. And while this morning, we're not looking around, we're looking up to see certainty from a heavenly perspective. You see, Revelation 7 helps us to look beyond the uncertainties of this world and see the certainty of how all history will end. Just to get our bearings again, Revelation was written in the first century by the Apostle John. He's received visions of reality from a heavenly perspective, which are spoken to seven churches to reassure them and to encourage them to persevere. Because in the end, God wins.

There's a throne. We saw that in chapter four. God's in control. There's a plan. We saw that in chapter five. It's not going to carry on like it is now. Jesus is going to put everything right.

[5 : 31] And then last week with the seals, we saw that, yes, there is a purpose. Suffering does continue today. Remember those four horsemen unleashing all the horrors in the world mysteriously under God's control. And it culminates in the final day of judgment to come. Chapter six ended with a big question, didn't it? Have a look. Chapter six, verse 19, 1917. For the great day of their wrath has come.

And who can stand? Who can bear up under all that will happen on the last day when God's judgment is poured out on full? If you're looking in on the Christian faith here this morning, then that is a massive question. It's a terrifying question, really. Who can stand? What does my eternal future hold? Well, Revelation seven acts as a bit of an interlude between seals six and seven to give us the answer. Who can stand? God's people will stand. John is given two magnificent visions of God's people.

They are sealed for salvation on earth. And then they are singing for salvation in eternity. And those are our two points this morning. And so firstly, then God's people are sealed for salvation on earth. The opening verses act as a bit of a flashback before the four winds or the four horsemen unleash their sufferings on earth. The one of the three. Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads. Now, in the in the ancient world, seals were familiar. It's a mark of ownership and a guarantee of protection. Now it's new uniform shopping season, perhaps you've already bought some new clothes ready for the school year and what does the diligent parent do after they buy new clothes? They get the sharpie out and they write the name in the back of the jumper for the new uniform. It's a seal of ownership, it marks it out as belonging to that child.

Though in our family we have a slight problem because of the generosity of the church family, James thinks he's Wilf Evans, Henry Riggs and Caspar Elgood sometimes at the same time with all the names written in his clothes. But you get the point, just as a seal of ownership is placed on clothes, God has placed a seal of ownership on all his people. They are marked out as belonging to him.

[8 : 36] But we can write names in our clothes, can't we? And in books and other things, but we can't guarantee their protection. Your child gets a new school jumper on day one and it's lost on day three.

That was my history anyway. But God is the sovereign God and when he puts his seal on his people, none are lost. We can be sure of that. It's not only a mark of ownership, it's a mark of protection.

And what is this seal? Well, not a physical branding like a tattoo that we all have to have, but an invisible spiritual seal. The Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 1, 13 and 14, I'll put the verses on the handout. In him, you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. What a comfort that is. If you put your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, then you have God's spirit within you sealing your salvation.

It's a deposit, a deposit of eternity to come. Now, that seal doesn't protect us from all suffering now in this life. Being a Christian is not a vaccine of all pain in this life, if you like. We still face broken bones, hearts and families. And these things hurt very much, don't they? And we know that.

But they don't hurt ultimately, because God, his seal is placed on his people, guarantees that no suffering that comes our way will ever do us any ultimate harm, because our salvation is sealed.

[10 : 39] That's the point of the 144,000. Have a look down at verse 4. And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000 sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel.

Now, 144,000 is roughly the population of the Isle of Wight, but it's a big mistake to take this number also as the literal population of heaven. Jehovah's Witnesses used to think that there are 144,000 who are saved and they were it. That was until the problem came that there became more than 144,000 Jehovah's Witnesses. So they had to do a bit of a rethink on that one. But that interpretation totally misses the point. It's a symbolic number. This is a vision, not video.

It comes from the 12 tribes of Israel, representing the people of God in the Old Testament, and the 12 apostles representing the people of God in the New Testament.

Now, a bit of quick maths. 12 times 12 is 144. And multiply that by 1,000, a large number that symbolises fullness and completion. And the number represents the full totality of the people of God. And that view is backed up by verse 9. You see, John sees the crowd from another angle.

Have a look down. A great multitude that no one could number. And if you can't number it, then it's not a literal 144,000, is it? You see, the number and the list make the point that all of God's true people are sealed. None are lost. They are protected from the winds of judgment, ultimately.

[12:33] Now, to the persecuted Christians John is writing to, that must have come as a massive encouragement and relief. No matter what people said or did to them, God had sealed them and none of them would be lost. Their eternal salvation is secure. And ultimately, they are protected by God.

And for us today, in light of all that's going on in the world, it's easy, isn't it, to feel insecure, feel as though we're out of control, as these outside forces affect us. Biological forces with the virus. Economic forces with a looming recession. And political forces with government decisions that affect our daily lives. But before the forces are allowed to enter the world, every one of God's people receive that seal. A mark of ownership, a guarantee of protection. And so if you're trusting in Jesus this morning, that is true for you through God's Holy Spirit. And with all that's going on, it's easy to feel insignificant, isn't it? I mean, here's just me. I'm one person with my own struggles amidst the whole world that's suffering. But wonderfully, God knows and notices each one of his people. And we're not unseen and invisible to him. He sees us. He's marked us. He will look after us. God has sealed his people for salvation.

God's people are sealed for salvation on earth. Then the second half of Revelation 7 gives us a second vision. The camera moves away from earth, if you like, up to heaven to see the view of what's going on there. And we find a wonderful vision of the future, the people of God praising in heaven. And so secondly, then, God's people are singing for salvation in eternity. Have a look down at verse 9 with me.

After this, I looked and behold a great multitude that no one could number from every nation, from all tribes and all peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands. I saw a list recently of the largest gatherings in human history.

That's 6 million in Manila for a papal mass. 10 million people turned up in Tehran for a funeral of Ayatollah Komeni.

[15:25] And surprisingly, 3.5 million people turned up for a Rod Stewart concert in Rio de Janeiro. I wasn't expecting that one when I looked on the list. But those vast gatherings are completely dwarfed by this huge crowd in John's vision. All the people of God throughout history gathered together, saved.

And it's not just the elite few that make it like getting through the SAS training course. It's an immeasurable number. God will save people from every tribe and nation.

Sometimes, I guess, we can feel isolated and alone, particularly when we can't leave the house that much. Perhaps you're also the only Christian in your office or your classroom or family.

Before lockdown, I would walk physically to church. Remember those days? And you see countless people walking the other way to the park and to other places. The early Christians John was writing to would have felt very small.

Lots of them persecuted for their faith, perhaps wondering if they've backed a loser. After all, John is writing to them from a penal colony, exiled. But this vision reminds us and the Christians back then that we haven't backed a loser because it shows us the future and that God wins.

[16:57] The Lamb wins. God's people win. And if we are trusted in Jesus, we are part of this huge crowd.

We might feel small now, but in eternity, we will be a vast number who worship Jesus the Lamb from all over the world. And when we meet now each week, we have a little glimpse of that heavenly future as people from all over the world.

Even now, you may be in a different country, joining us together, singing praises to Jesus. And notice what that crowd sing about.

Verse 10. They're crying out with a loud voice. Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb. It's clear they're not patting each other on the back saying, well done you.

The praise and the glory is all going to God and Jesus, the Lamb who was slain. He alone is the source of salvation. And so it won't be like one of those prize giving assemblies at school.

[18:08] You remember those at the end of each year? And they're really dull, aren't they? You sit there and people go up to get their awards for poetry, for maths, sport and effort.

That was a token prize, wasn't it? Each prize winner goes up, they get their trophy, there's a handshake and a round of applause. And by the end of it all, your hands are red, raw. They're really dull assemblies. Perhaps I'm bitter because I never got a prize, but still they're really dull. But it won't be like that in heaven, as though we've all earned the prize of being there. The only applause and praise will be for Jesus, the Lamb and to God. Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

Then a voice comes in this vision describing more of how this crowd got to be there. Have a look down at verse 14. These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

[19 : 22] The crowd are dressed in white robes which have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. Now, normally we wash blood stains out of clothes, don't we, using a vanish or something else like that.

And with a toddler around, this is never far away. And we use quite a lot of that. But these white robes have been washed in blood. It's a bit odd, isn't it? But we have to remember that this is a vision, not a video.

It's a vivid picture describing how the only way to be saved, to be part of that immeasurable crowd praising Jesus in eternity on the final day is to be washed through the sacrifice of Jesus.

You see, there's nothing that vanish or pursel can do for my sin and the things I've done wrong and for not putting God first, for putting myself in charge.

But here is the way of washing us on the inside. The crucifixion of Jesus in our place, wiping, clear, washing our guilt, our failure, our sin.

[20 : 34] And instead, we are given Jesus' perfection and purity, which the white robes symbolise. And so if you're here this morning looking in on the Christian faith, here is the answer to the question at the end of chapter six.

How is it that someone can stand in the awful, awesome judgment to come? How can someone avoid being like one of those who calls on the mountain to hide them?

By washing your robes in the blood of Jesus. That means putting your trust in Jesus and his sacrifice in our place.

The moment anyone does that, they are sealed for salvation and with the Holy Spirit. This then is a timely reminder for those churches John is writing to who've gone off the boil.

They've wandered into false teaching. Well, John is writing to say that only Jesus the Lamb delivers salvation. There is no other way.

[21 : 41] Sin is washed away. As the famous 19th century hymn describes, what can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

And so likewise, we are to keep going with that true gospel message of the Bible, never departing from the cleansing found at the cross.

And John is also writing to a group of churches who have gone a bit half-hearted. And this vision just reignites their love for Jesus.

Perhaps that's some of us this morning feeling weary, not just in life, but in our faith. Well, we are to gaze afresh at the wonderful future that Jesus has delivered for us and what he has done and that to reignite our love and praise and thankfulness to him.

And to help us in that, in his vision, the last verses give us a wonderful picture of the heavenly future of safety, security, and shelter.

[22 : 55] Have a look down at verse 15. 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.

They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more. The sun shall not strike them nor any scorching heat. 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 every tear from their eyes.

God's people will be gathered around the throne serving him for all eternity. He himself will shelter them with their presence.

No more hunger, no more thirst, no more scorching heat, no more tribulation, no more tears. I don't know what's made you cry recently.

In this world, life begins and ends with tears. But God will bring eternal comfort to all those who are in Christ Jesus, wiping away every tear from their eyes.

[24 : 06] That is a wonderful promise to hold on to amidst the pain of this life now. Well, as we close then, thankfully, live sport is back on the agenda.

Beforehand, a lot of broadcasters had resorted to showing a lot of repeats to fill the schedule. Maybe you saw some of the Wimbledon greatest matches or notably the repeat of the Cricket World Cup final from last summer.

I remember watching it live. We were on summer camp. It was agony. And we were there crowded around various devices watching and listening and to every run being greeted with a cheer. It seemed impossible at one stage that England would win. It was really stressful. But I found it a lot easier watching the repeat, funnily enough, because I knew what happened.

I knew we won. The result wouldn't change. And Revelation 7 gives us two wonderful visions to give us confidence that God wins, the Lamb wins, and his people will win.

[25 : 22] The result won't change. Eternal victory is signed, sealed, and delivered. I don't know how you feel as we look to the future.

How will it all end? Amidst the uncertainties of life now, we can look to the certainty from the heavenly perspective.

The great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand? God's people will stand. God doesn't promise to protect us from all harmless life now, but whatever we face, we can know Jesus is with us if we have trusted in him.

Jesus, by the seal of his Holy Spirit, is with us every step to come, and through death to the life to come. God's people are sealed for salvation on earth, and will be singing for salvation in eternity. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for Jesus, the Lamb. We thank you that we can be washed clean through his death for us.

[26 : 38] We thank you for these visions of the future and your protection over your people. Please keep convincing us that this is true.

When we are struggling, please help us to look to that seal and to the future. Amen.