

A vision of heaven

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[0 : 00] Reading today is Revelation 7. It can be found on page 1239. That's Revelation chapter 7, page 1239.

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 the 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 the earth and sea, saying, Do not harm the earth or the sea or 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 Reuben. Twelve thousand from the tribe of Gad. Twelve thousand from the tribe of Asher. Twelve thousand from the tribe of Naphtali. Twelve thousand from the tribe of Manasseh.

[1 : 14] Twelve thousand from the tribe of Simeon. Twelve thousand from the tribe of Levi. Twelve thousand 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 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 round the throne, 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 for ever and ever. Amen.

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, Who are these clothed in white robes, and from where have they come? And 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.

[2 : 51] They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more. The sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat, for the Lamb is in the midst of the throne and will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water.

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Well, good morning. It's great to be with you this morning for the final talk in our Revelation series on Revelation chapter 7.

Please do keep your Bibles open on page 1239, and on the back of your service sheets you'll find an outline of today's talk. Before we begin, why don't I pray for us?

Heavenly Father, we give you great thanks for your word. We thank you that through it we hear your voice speaking to us. We pray, Heavenly Father, that as we read Revelation 7 this morning, and think about it, that you would speak to us, that you would change us and transform us, that you would set our hearts and our minds on heaven and on the great day when the Lord Jesus returns.

I pray these things in his name. Amen. We're always trying to achieve a better world, aren't we?

[4 : 20] From Plato's Republic, through to Tony Blair's promise that things can only get better. From Karl Marx and his Communist Manifesto, through to Barack Obama and his promise that change has come.

Our politicians, philosophers, musicians, preachers, have long been holding out the possibility of a better world. And yet for all the progress that's been made, still today there is war and hatred.

For all of his promises of change, Barack Obama still has to deal with two messy wars and an American economy in crisis. We're remembering today all of those people who have given their lives for their country.

Yet still today there are desperate situations in countries around the world which suggest that we are as far from a perfect world with peace and security as we have ever been.

That should come as no surprise to any of us who were here last week. As we saw last week in Revelation chapter 6, that this is a world that is under God's judgment. And that's why the world will always be like it is until Jesus returns.

[5 : 38] But Revelation chapter 6 leaves us with a question, doesn't it? If this is what the world is like, if it's under God's judgment, what about God's people?

In a world that is under God's judgment now, in a world that is full of turmoil, is there any security for God's people? When we see dreadful things happening or experience difficult things ourselves, it's easy to think, isn't it?

Has God forgotten? Has he forgotten about me? Has he forgotten about his people? Where is he? What is he doing? And we have questions about the future too, don't we?

How can God's people be sure about what the future holds? How do we know that in that day of judgment that Revelation 6 describes, we won't be facing the wrath of the Lamb and crying out in terror when he comes on that day?

Well, Revelation 7 answers exactly those questions. Its purpose is to show that God's people are secure in the present and secure in the future through what Jesus has done for us.

[6 : 49] We're going to look at those two things under the headings on your outline, a secure people and a saved people. So firstly then, a secure people.

And what we see in verses 1 to 8 of chapter 7 is that God's people are secure in this world that is under his judgment. Chapter 7 opens with a new vision.

One of four angels standing at the four corners of the earth holding back the four winds of the earth. These angels then receive a message from another angel who bears the seal of the living God that they are to restrain any harm happening to the world until God's people are sealed.

As the vision then goes on in verses 4 to 8, John hears the number of the people who are sealed, that 144,000 from the tribes of Israel are sealed, 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes.

Well there are two ways then that John's vision helps us to see that God's people are secure now. There is the vision of the angels holding back God's judgment across the world while God's people are sealed. And then John hears the number of the seals, the 144,000.

[8 : 03] And these things are helping us to see that God's people are secure now in the presence in this world that is under his judgment. Now when we hear words like seal or sealed, particularly in the context of revelation, it's very easy for us isn't it to jump straight to slightly wacky interpretations that involve barcodes and special marks and things like that.

But the sealing that John sees here, although there is an outward sign of it, the people are sealed on their foreheads. It isn't intended to be obscure or to need a special interpretation that we sort of need to figure out.

The big thing that we're to notice is not the physical manifestation of the sealing, but that God has sealed his people. It's telling us that God has set aside those people who are his servants, that he will keep them safe and preserve them as the world is under his judgment.

God has set his people aside. He knows those who are his and will keep them no matter what they face as they are part of a world under his judgment. God's sealing of his people doesn't mean that they are taken out of the world immediately.

Rather, they are kept safe through the judgments that the world faces. They are set aside. They are under God's particular and special care as the world faces his judgments.

[9 : 40] And did you notice that it's Christians from everywhere who are secure? The four angels hold back the four winds of the earth at the four corners of the earth so that the earth and season trees aren't harmed until the sealing has taken place.

Christians everywhere from all of God's creation are sealed and secure. Christians in those parts of the world who face persecution for being Christians have been sealed by God.

Christians who face natural disasters and live in war zones are under God's care. So no matter what happens, no matter what horrific things Christians face today, God has them and will not let them go.

God hasn't forgotten his people just because the rest of the world has. God knows those who are his and is caring for them no matter the circumstances that they face.

So God's people from everywhere in the whole world are secure. But the vision goes on in verses 4 to 8 as John wants to underline to his hearers that God has secured all of his people that not one of his people has been forgotten that they are all under his care.

[11 : 04] Now famously or should I say infamously these verses have been misinterpreted particularly although not uniquely by Jehovah's Witnesses who take these verses and this number to be the literal number of God's people who are with him in heaven.

Now you may well have had Jehovah's Witnesses coming to the door and discussing things like this but according to this view there will be no more and no fewer people with God in heaven than this.

The 144,000 are it. No more and no less. Just before we go any further let's be clear about this. That understanding of these verses is wrong.

And it's wrong because John is not intending to literally number the amount of believers who will be with him in heaven.

The number 144,000 is symbolic. It's intended to tell us something about God's people rather than to encourage us to sort of tally them or keep account of them.

[12 : 12] So did you notice that John hears the number of God's people in verse 4? He says in verse 4 I heard the number of the seals 144,000 and then he sees in verse 9 the countless multitudes.

So he hears something about God's people and then he sees them. Now I've come across this device before in chapter 5 I don't know if you remember it but John hears that the lion of Judah has conquered and is worthy to open the scroll and then he looks at the throne and sees the lamb standing as though it had been slain.

So hearing something and then sort of seeing it helps John to understand what it is that he's just heard. And it's exactly the same thing again here. John hears the number 144,000 and then he sees the multitudes in verse 9.

The multitude which is beyond counting. So we're not supposed to be treating this number as a literal number thinking that this is it for God's people.

John is telling us something about God's people rather than saying to us keep a count. So the question is then what is John intending to show through this number 144,000 if he's not literally counting the number of God's people?

[13 : 38] Well, there are 12 tribes in Israel representing the people of God and hopefully they're listed here so we know that we're on the right lines.

12 tribes of Israel and 12,000 sealed from each of the 12 tribes. I'm not a brilliant mathematician but 12 multiplied by 12 is 144 I can tell you that much and the number represents all of God's people.

All of them. The thousands is simply a big number the equivalent of John sort of underlining or putting an exclamation mark next to his point that this is all of God's people.

Almost as if it's there for emphasis. So John's point is that each and every one of God's people is sealed. The many countless millions of them from across the world and down the ages all of them are under God's care and protection and therefore they are all every last one of them is safe and secure.

Every last one. Now of course it may not always feel like that. In the later parts of chapter 7 John is told that God's people have come out of the great tribulation which is simply a reference to the world this world that's under judgment.

[15 : 12] God's people experience the world now as tribulation as a place that is difficult and full of injustice and evil and pain. And that's no surprise is it the world is under God's judgment Revelation 6 tells us.

So even though all of God's people are safe and secure it may not always feel like that but John wants us to know that each and every one of God's people is safe and secure.

Some time ago back in the summer I spent an afternoon with my nephews who are just about three and two years old. Now as toddlers of that age tend to want to do we went to the playground for a couple of hours and as usual while the grown-ups were sitting chatting sensibly at the sides of the playground my nephews just cut loose and ran off to play on anything and everything.

Now there were times for my nephews even in that playground when they got a little bit scared a little bit panicked when they were stuck at the top of the climbing frame and couldn't quite get down again or when they were at the top of the slide and the queue forming behind them while they debated with themselves do I actually want to do this or not and there were times when they just got a bit scared they were panicked and they felt isolated but of course they were never alone even if at times they did feel isolated for a moment of course they were never alone whenever they were in trouble daddy would pitch up lift them down from the slides get them down from the top of the climbing frame and off they would go again and that's just a small picture isn't it of what John is saying that God is like with us he's always caring for us watching over us even when we can't quite feel that he is and that's a great encouragement to every

Christian isn't it when we experience first hand the kinds of things that chapter six is talking about when we experience grief over loss of someone we love or persecution when we feel like the world is in turmoil and unsecure and unsafe when we see that crime figures are rising and tyrants are prospering John wants us to be sure that God is taking care of his people right here and right now so in the face of a world that is under judgment Jesus' people are secure whatever is happening in the world Jesus' people are secure but John's vision doesn't stop there with God's people secure in the here and now John wants his hearers to be confident about the future and that they will be secure when Jesus returns and this is our second point on the handouts saved people in verses 9 to 17 so verses 1 to 8 describe the reality of life on earth in the here and now in verses 9 to 17 the focus changes and we're presented with a vision of heaven on the great and last day when Jesus returns to judge the world and there are two parts to John's vision here of Jesus and his people in the throne room firstly we see that Jesus' people can be confident about the future and the day of his return because he has rescued and saved his people and we'll also see that his people are secure for relationship with Jesus the vision begins in verse 9 when John sees that countless multitude of God's people gathered around the throne from every tribe and tongue and nation from across all of his creation wearing white robes waving palm branches and joining the worship of heaven this picture is an echo of the picture we had of

[19 : 13] God's throne room in chapter 4 except now God's people are gathered around the throne on the great and final day when Jesus returns to judge and the song that the people sing in worship is there in verse 10 salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb the reason that God's people are there worshipping him is because he has saved them and that great salvation is the focus of their worship and their joy but not only are this countless multitude singing the praises of the saving God their very presence around the throne is a witness is a testament of his saving work so three times in these verses in verses 9 13 and 14 we're told that the people are wearing white robes having washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb John knows very well of course that if you wash a white garment in blood it won't stay white for very long it'll turn red so the white robes that have been washed in the blood of the Lamb is a symbol a clear reference to the saving work of Jesus that through his death through his blood shed on the cross he has made his people fit and ready for heaven

Jesus' blood has purified his people removed every sin from them so that they can stand before the holy God who is on the throne and sing his praise and Revelation 7 is reminding us that this is the grounds upon which God's people can stand around his throne and stand with security in the face of his judgments it's not because his people have done something special it's not particularly because they are worth saving it's entirely because Jesus has given his life for them and his blood has made them clean that is how God has saved and rescued his people his son has died for them and that is why they stand before the throne and that's great encouragement to Christians isn't it our standing before God doesn't depend on our track record doesn't depend on our performance we have a status in God's eyes that we don't deserve which is entirely a gift of his grace and that means we can have certainty about the future day of Jesus coming because we know that this future doesn't depend on our performance doesn't depend on how religious we are or how good we can be it depends entirely on Jesus and his saving work so if our standing before

God depended on our efforts we would have to acknowledge wouldn't we that we would never be good enough holy enough perfect enough to know him and be in relationship with him we could never do it by our own efforts and gloriously we don't have to if we did if we had to prove ourselves to God we would have no assurance we would always be thinking day after day have I done enough to please him we would look to the day of Jesus return with uncertainty and insecurity not knowing what the verdicts on us would be but Christians look forward to that day with rejoicing because we know now what the verdict will be that Jesus will come for his people and he will say they are mine and can I just say it's worth noticing isn't it that it is it's this God it's the God of revelation the God of the Bible who is the God who saves now that sounds very obvious doesn't it and the kind of thing that you would expect to hear at a Christian service that it's the God of the

Bible who saves but time and again the Bible wants us to be clear that it is the true and living God who is the God that saves one of the things that separates Christianity from other world religions is that lots of them will say in one form or another your standing before God is defined by your performance so if you clean up your act if you religiously observe everything that God wants you to do you might just be okay if God is feeling merciful but equally you could do all of those things and find out that it's still not enough there is never security where status depends upon performance and that is why the Christian can be secure looking towards that day because our status before God is secured by Jesus death and can I just say to you if you're someone here this morning looking in on the Christian faith I hope you can see why it is that

Christians are so sure about the future and why it isn't arrogance for Christians to be certain about the future and to be certain that God will accept them when he returns to judge if Christians were saying God will accept us because we're morally superior to everyone else because we are in some sense better than anyone else then of course that would be hugely arrogant but the reality is that every Christian should know that they aren't superior to anyone else in fact Christians are people who recognise that they are a moral mess that they don't meet God's standards of goodness and morality let alone anyone else's and that they need to be rescued to stand before a holy God Christians are people who recognise that they can't do it on their own and that's the heart of the Christian message well the climax of

[25 : 07] John's vision then arrives in verses 15 to 17 as we see what it is that God's people are secure for we see the relationship between the Lord Jesus and his people and aren't these verses a wonderful picture of an intimate relationship between Jesus and his people the lamb who was slain for his people who laid his life down for his people has now become the shepherd who rules and leads his people and just look at how his rule is described in these verses so the lamb shelters his people verse 15 he feeds them in verses 16 and 17 he guides them to springs of living water in verse 17 he will wipe away every tear from their eyes in verse 17 and it's not just that the lamb feeds and waters his people but there is a complete absence of hunger and thirst those things have gone there is no more famine or drought the lamb shelters his people there is no more wandering in the desert the lamb protects his people he wipes away every tear from their eyes there is no more grief or mourning or bereavement all that God's people have suffered through the world is dealt with by the lamb who has become the shepherd king ruling his people with sacrificial love and kindness and graciousness and this is just a wonderful picture of the relationship that God's people will enjoy with the Lord Jesus when he returns they will know him intimately and enjoy relationship with him for all eternity here is the new world that people have been trying to achieve for centuries but it isn't brought about by a political system by a philosophical idea or by moral teaching this is God's new world where his people will enjoy relationship with the Lord

Jesus brought about by his blood shed on the cross peace we're remembering today the sacrifice made by thousands of people who have given their lives to their country so that we might enjoy the peace and the freedom that we have yet what we see in Revelation 7 is a picture of the country that Jesus died for a picture of a country that is free from war free from famine free from financial uncertainty and insecurity free from sorrow and mourning over the loss of loved ones a country where Jesus and his people will enjoy intimate relationship this is the country that Jesus gave his life for to secure it for his people this country is the certain future that all of God's people have why don't I pray for us heavenly father we pray to you and thank you for the security and certainty that we have both now and for the future and please would you help us to set our hearts on that great country that the Lord Jesus died to secure for us please would you help us to live for that day when he returns and we will see him face to face and enjoy intimate relationship with him in Jesus name we pray

Amen