

# "The Protection of the Lamb"

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 28 January 2024

Preacher: Matt Coburn

[ 0 : 00 ] Well, good morning. There we go. It's good to see you all here. I was just talking before the service.

We need to see the sun come out. We think the sun has shown about three days in January so far. So either that or we're all going to go by sunlamps. But it's good to see you here. Hopefully the warmth of the love of God will warm our hearts this morning. So, you know, this morning I want to begin with a question that I think is in the hearts of many in our culture. Both in the church and outside of the church today. And it is a question that builds on what we learned last week. If you're visiting, if you haven't been here, we are preaching a series through the book of Revelation.

And last week we learned about the coming judgment of God. In fact, it is a judgment that has already begun and will have its fulfillment in what is to come.

[ 1 : 05 ] And as Pastor Nick laid it out, he reminded us that this judgment is actually a good thing. Because it means that God cares about the evil of the world. And that in the end, evil will not win.

But that justice will be brought upon this earth. And so, it was meant to be a hopeful word to a church that was suffering persecution and evil.

And seeing it impact their very daily lives. And the cry, how long, O Lord, was met with the promise, I will come and do this. And so, this is what we learned last week.

But it raises a question, doesn't it? Which is, well, why hasn't he done that yet? Why hasn't he come to make it all right?

What is he waiting for? It's a good question. It's an important question. But the answer dovetails with the answer to the question that we saw at the very end of chapter 6.

[ 2 : 12 ] Which is, on the day of judgment, who can stand? Hold on to those things. Why isn't God waiting? And who can stand? And we're going to pull those things back together at the end.

To see where we go. We're looking at Revelation chapter 7 today. So, if you want to turn there and you pew Bibles, it would be great for you to have it in front of you so you can follow along. I didn't look up the page number, but Revelation is the last book in the Bible. So, go to the back and then flip forward a couple pages and you'll probably be at Revelation 7. So, Revelation chapter 7 is our passage this morning.

And let's go ahead and read it together. 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.

And I saw another angel ascending from the rising 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.

[ 3 : 34 ] And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel. 12,000 from the tribes of Judah were sealed.

12,000 from the tribes of Reuben. 12,000 from the tribe of Gad. 12,000 from the tribe of Asher.

12,000 from the tribe of Naphtali. 12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh.

12,000 from the tribe of Simeon. 12,000 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.

And 12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed. 13,000 from the tribe of Israel.

13,000 from the tribe of Judah. 14,000 from the tribe of Dan. 14,000 from the tribe of Israel.

15,000 from the tribe of Israel. 15,000 from the tribe of Israel. 15,000 from the tribe of Israel. 14,000

from the tribe of Israel. 15,000 from the tribe of Israel. Are there another one in Sulph cope in

Israel? 15,000 from the tribe of Israel. 16,000 from the tribe of Israel. 15,000 from the tribe of Israel. [ 4 : 53 ] 16,000 from the tribe of Israel. 16,000 from the tribe a Christian. 16,000 from Israel.

17,000 from Israel. 17,000 from Israel. 18,000 from Israel. 18,000 from Israel. 21,000 from Israel. 18,000 from Israel. I said to them, 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. Let's pray. Lord, we ask for Your help this morning as we sit under Your Word. Lord, help us to understand these visions as You would have us to understand them. Lord, in our hearts, Lord, give us clarity of thought. In our hearts, Lord, give us softness of mind to submit and to receive this Word this morning. And I pray for Your help that I might speak as I ought. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. So, friends, what this passage reveals is this, that God is withholding His ultimate judgment in the world because He is in the process of redeeming for Himself a people from the whole world who will worship Him forever. That's the answer to the questions. Let me explore how that's true. We're going to look at the passage. This is what we're going to do this morning. We're going to first look at the content of it. We're going to look at the structure. We're going to try to answer some questions that are raised from it. And then we're going to look at three implications of that for us and for our church. So that's what we're going to do structurally. If you're a note taker, we're going to have first content, two points, and then implications, three. So there's your outline. So first, in verses 1 through 8, what we see is a vision of the sealing of God's people to be preserved through judgment, right? So again, you see the beginning of this vision starting after this, I saw. And this is a literary clue to say this is a new vision. This is a new thing. And remember, last week we had six bowls, and we're waiting for the seventh. It'll come in chapter 8. But there's this almost interlude. There's this interspersing of this other vision in the midst of it that I think is related to what comes before, as we've talked about. And what you see is that the agents of judgment, the angels, are standing at the four corners of the earth waiting to bring this judgment that God has said on the earth. And yet what you see is God not saying, go do this, which is what we would expect from the end of chapter 6. But wait, wait, wait, there's something else going on here.

[ 8 : 13 ] And this angel arises from the dawn, and he bears the seal of God. And this sealing is so important. If you look through in verses 1 through 8, sealed is repeated in chapter 2, or in verse 2, and verse 3, and verse 4, and verse 5, and then again in verse 8. Who are those who are sealed? Well, remember, apocalyptic literature is often based on Old Testament. What we see, if we go back to Ezekiel chapter 9, there is a command and a vision. There's a vision of these six men who were sent into Jerusalem to bring judgment on the people of Israel because they had forsaken God and turned to idolatry. But in the middle of that, there was one who was given a seal, and he was sent to go out, in verses 4 through 6, to seal those who wept at the idolatry of Israel and who grieved at the fallenness of God's people. And so John is pulling on this vision, this concept of a sealing, not the sealing on a roof, but the seal that comes like when you drop wax and you put a signet ring in it, a sealing, this one's mine, that God is going to do with his people.

This is what you see as we go on in Revelation. In chapter 9, verse 4, we will see that those who are sealed are protected from the fifth trumpet and the impact of that. We will also see that in Revelation 14 that the seal seems to be the very name of God put on the forehead. Again, this is apocalyptic imagery, but it's connected with being sealed with the very name of God, as if God were saying, these are mine. And it is distinct in the book of Revelation, as we'll see later. You all have heard about the infamous mark of the beast. We'll get there and explain it, but there's a distinction. God's people are sealed by his name. Those who have the mark of the beast, whatever it is, and that's coming later. Those are marked with a different mark, the mark of rebellion against God, okay? And we'll see that in chapters 13 and 16 coming up. So in this vision, the angel says, wait, hold back the judgment until we are done sealing those who are God's. And friends, we know as we read the rest of our Bible, we think about a passage like Ephesians 1, 13 and 14, describing the effect of salvation on believers in the church of God. Chapter 1, it says this, in him, that is in Christ, 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. God says, hold back the judgment because I am sealing more and more people, right? And he says, and I know every one of them because there are 144,000 of them, right?

And when God gets to 144,001, he's done, right? Isn't that, no, hold on, hold on. That's not how apocalyptic numbers work. We've seen numbers already. There are seven horns and seven eyes and 24 elders. Numbers in apocalyptic literature are not meant to be given as calculated numbers, but they're meant to be symbols, just like lots of the other images are. So what is the number 144 symbolized? Well, there's lots of different things. It's fascinating. I did a little research. The church of Latter-day Saints, the Mormon church, says that there are, it's a special class of people who minister in the world that are distinct and have special privileges and that will have special eternal glory because of that. If you read the Jehovah's Witness website, they will tell you that it's a special class of people who will rule with God in heaven over the new earth that will be recreated in their vision. So both of them take this 144 and make it a special class. There's also, as many of you probably know, there's a strain of evangelical Christianity which would talk about this as being there are 144 special descendants of the Jewish people who will be saved before the end, okay?

And that's partly because we see right after this, there's this 12 tribes list and they think this is a special thing that God is doing. Now look, we know from Romans 9 to 11 that God has this, a love for the Jewish people that is unique and special and he does have a plan for their salvation. But I don't believe that's what this passage is saying. I think instead 144,000 is saying there are 12 tribes, we're going to multiply that by itself. We're going to square it so you can see how glorious it is. And then we're going to multiply by a thousand so that we have 144, which is 12 times 12, that's 12 squared, times a thousand. What is this signifying? God knows the fullness of his people.

[13:52] And he's going to wait until the, for that judgment to finally come so that the fullness of his people will be rescued. And that's what's being, and these are those who are preserved through judgment. And we will continue to see that. These are not those who are somehow spirited out of the great trials or persecution.

And so we see this as an ongoing thing that is happening during the church age, maybe with some intensifying power near the end that may be coming at any time. But we know that this is an ongoing thing that will build towards the knowledge and the confidence that one day God will come with the final judgment. He will end this process of judging the world by completing it. But he will do so when he has completely redeemed each one that he knows, each one that he will save.

And this is a great hope and a great promise. Think about the believers in the first century. A small church under a Roman rule facing terrible persecutions. This vision reminds them, God knows his own, and he will not forsake you. He will preserve you through even the judgment.

So the second vision then starts with verse 9. Oh, there's so much more I could tell you about the 12 tribes. If you have questions about that, come talk to me later. But the second vision starts in verse 9, and it continues. And again, we see this verbal clue, right? After this I looked, or after this I saw. Again, we see now a second vision in chapter 7, and what we see is again people. But now these aren't people on earth who are being sealed before the judgment, but these are people in the throne room of God, what we've seen in chapters 4 and 5, right? People in the throne room temple of God worshiping before the king. And these are people from every nation, from every tongue, every tribe, every peoples. What a glorious vision it is. If the 144 and the 12 tribes is a picture of fullness, this is an even greater amplification of this idea of God's fullness, that he is going to be at work throughout the whole world to gather people so that they can worship him in this victory celebration.

They wear white robes, which is a picture of victory. They hold palm branches, which is a praising that would be used to celebrate a victorious military leader. And they sing the song, salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and the Lamb. And these are new people in the throne room vision. Well, we've seen them in chapter 5, but they're back again, right? They've added on to the angels and the 24 elders and the four living creatures, this vision of people, the whole of creation gathering around God to worship him. And they say, as people from every tribe and tongue and nation worship God and say, salvation belongs to you, they say, amen. Amen. God, let it be so that to you, God, be all honor and praise and glory. And then the passage continues in verse 13.

There's this little conversation between the elder and John. And at the end, the question is, who are these? Who are these people? Who are the...

[ 17 : 58 ] And in the end, the elder says, these are those who've been brought through the great tribulation. Now, I want to stop here for just a minute because, again, in our church history, particularly in America in the last 200 years, there's lots of conversations. If you've ever read Left Behind or seen the movies, you know that there's... If you're like me, you grew up young, old enough to remember the great movies of Hal Lindsey and the Thief in the Night movies and things like this idea that there's going to be a great tribulation and God's going to rescue people out of it. And this very specific way about how all these things play out. And some of it comes from Revelation. And if you haven't picked up on it yet, that's not quite how we see Revelation. We don't think that's the best reading of it. The great tribulation, though, is a theme that we see throughout it. Matthew, in Matthew 24, Jesus said, and the days are coming when there will be a great trial. And he describes, I think, in one way, the fall of Jerusalem to Rome in AD 70 and the destruction of the temple. But it seems, as you look at his description, that it's more than that. It's the ongoing, the coming of those who would claim to be saviors but aren't saviors. Those who would claim to proclaim truth like prophets but aren't speaking truth. And the judgment of God that will continue. And it dovetails with what we've seen in Revelation so far. That the church is living in an age where God's judgment has begun, but it's not yet full and complete. And it will come to its fruition one day. We also see in Daniel chapter 12, verse 1, there's a vision that he's talking about. It says, and there shall be a time of trouble or tribulation. That's the same word. Such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time, your people shall be delivered and everyone whose name shall be written, shall be found written in the book. So there's this, there's this theme that John is picking up in this great tribulation. But rather than it being this just distinct future, and I'll just throw it out there, some people think it's seven years or seven or three and a half years or something like that.

Recognize that we're in the age when the tribulation has begun. And yes, maybe there will be an intensification before the end. But this thread doesn't seem to be as specific as some would want it to be. And so I just want to say this is what I think what God is doing is he's gathering his people through this whole period who will be saved in and through this tribulation that will include God's judgment as well as the persecution and trials of living in a world that does not love God. Those who will be saved are those who, just want to stop on this for a minute, whose robes will be washed in the blood of the Lord. Now, have you ever washed anything in blood? No, you've never done it.

I promise you. Because when we get blood on our clothes, it stains it. It doesn't wash them clean. When you get blood, it's one of the hardest things to get out, right? Cold water. But the picture here is that actually those who are saved are saved through what we've already seen and talked about a number of times. That Jesus the Lamb, through the shedding of his blood, will wash away our sins. Fulfillment of Isaiah chapter 1 verse 18, come now, let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. This is what Jesus does, and this is the people of God that he's going to redeem.

[ 22 : 03 ] Those who have been washed by the blood of the Lamb, who by faith have taken on what Jesus has done for them and allowed him to give them a clean heart, a new spirit, a new life in him.

So this is what God is doing. His judgment will not be for the destruction of all, though it will be for some. He is waiting. Why? Because he is increasing the fullness of the numbers of his own people. 2 Peter chapter 3 verses 9 and 10. If you want to, go read the whole chapter because it's really fascinating because it's people asking the same thing. You believe in a God who says he's going to judge the world, but I don't think he's coming, so why should I pay any attention to you? Peter says, oh, the judgment is coming. But then he says this in verse 8, Friends, this is what God is doing. You are here because God has been patient. Can you imagine if a generation earlier God had finally heard the cries how long and said, okay, now is the time, and he had come, where would you be?

Not with these people worshiping God around the throne for eternity. God's patience is for our redemption and our salvation. And this is the beauty of why this passage is interspersed in the broader context of judgment in the book of Revelation, so that we might know this great truth, so that we might have confidence that it is not just that God will judge, but that God is doing a redemptive work in the midst of this working towards that. So what does this mean for us? If that's what the passage kind of says, what does this mean for us? Three things, I think. One, the church

experience will look like both suffering and preservation, okay? This passage tells us that we will come through the great tribulation, that those who are being saved are being saved in the context of judgment that has started and its fullness will come. And so we have to see that suffering is expected, and yet God will preserve us. We know that in the end, there is nothing that God can do, that the world can do that will stop that victory from happening. And look, we've lived in an age where the church has struggled. When we've taken on the victorious position, it has often been ugly. We've often taken on victory as a ha-ha, we've won and you didn't kind of picture. But we need to recognize that this victory that is coming comes, one, at the cost of the Son of God, and two, not because of any merit of our own.

So Christians are meant to have confidence in this victory, but not pride, not arrogance, not lording it over others, but instead inviting people saying, please come, come out of the storm into the refuge. Please come, though you will suffer for this. Because remember, this is what Jesus has promised us. He said, if they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they hated me, they will hate you also. If God is going to come and judge a world in rebellion against him, the world is going to hate God and his people, and we will suffer accordingly. And so as a church, we need to hold these things together. We are a suffering church and a victorious church.

[ 26 : 39 ] We are both going to see potentially unspeakable things happen to us because we follow Christ, and yet we know that in the end, God will hold us through and deliver us. And friends, there is nothing like, there's no strength like what knowing this can give to Christians. It gives us courage to live for him, not be afraid of what others think of us. It gives us strength to resist sin and temptation because we know that there's a greater good, a greater place that God is taking us to.

It gives us endurance to know that when we reach the end of our strength, God's strength to be faithful, to preserve us through whatever we're facing, has not failed, and that he will carry us through.

And it gives us hope. It gives us hope when we falter and fail that he's washed us with the blood of the Lamb, and that we are forgiven in Christ, and that even in our failure, his victory invites us back in to walk with him and to believe in him. So this is the first thing, is the experience of the church both suffering and preservation. The second thing is that, friends, there is a beautiful picture here of the extent of the church. The human diversity of this world is amazing. If you haven't had the chance to travel the world, do it, because it's so cool to see different languages and cultures and nations and histories and all of the ways that humanity is this kaleidoscope of reflecting the image of God.

And God has designed this kaleidoscope so that when he gathers this people around his throne forever, the richness of the worship will be multiplied and magnified like a prism rather than a beam of light.

It will be the beam of light through the prism that then gets sprayed out in the whole colors of the rainbow. This is what God is doing by gathering people from every tribe and tongue and nation.

[ 29 : 11 ] And friends, this is part of what we love about this church, is that God has given us just a little taste of that. Because some of you have come from tribes and tongues and nations across the world to worship with us and to be a part of this church.

And we're so glad that we have this kind of church so that we can taste it. So let me encourage you, if you have the opportunity, go talk to a brother or sister or someone you don't know.

Find out their history and see what God is doing throughout the world as you talk with them. Don't assume they're going to look different than you, so get to know everybody.

But as you do that, you'll find out, wow, we have people from all over the world in this church. But recognize, too, that we live in a city that has people who come from all over the world, whether it comes to the universities for study or whether it comes through the refugee resettlement program. We have people from all over the world who come to this city. If you want to speak Mandarin, go up to Prospect Street on a Tuesday morning at 10 o'clock.

[ 30 : 23 ] Talk to the grandmas and grandpas who are watching their kids, their grandkids, grandkids. Because it's there. The world comes to this place.

So, friends, we have a church to think about how do we reach the nations that are in our backyard? God. But we also need to hear the call of the Great Commission.

Jesus, in Matthew 28, you guys know this, but let's just read it so that we remember his words.

Matthew 28, Jesus says this, Friends, always to the end of the age. Friends, this vision of God's people in the future from the whole world needs to be heard by us as a call to go to the whole world

to tell them about Jesus.

We support our missionaries, the Tidwells in Southeast Asia, and Syed and Genia in Central Asia, the King seeking to reach Middle Eastern immigrants as well as Europeans. Esther Wu serves in Germany. Did you know that only 3% of Germans go to church on any given Sunday? It's as unreached as Connecticut, which is pretty terrible. So we recognize these who have said, here am I, send me. I'm willing to uproot my life from my comforts, from my everyday patterns, from being close to family and friends. I'm willing to uproot my life and go to the far ends of the world so that people who don't have the opportunities to hear about Jesus will have an opportunity to hear about Jesus so that they may be added to the number who are worshiping around the throne of the Lamb and God in heaven. Friends, God has called our church in this age to be a missional church. One day we will be a day where we will be a church at rest, but it is not now. It's not today. So for all of us, the question is, how are we going to be involved in that? Some are easy.

[ 33 : 00 ] Pray. Give. Some are harder. Go. But consider this. Consider this as a down payment. As you offer up your lives as a living sacrifice, it's a down payment for what we will be for all of eternity. As you give your life to this mission, God is building His people. And it leads to, Lord, it leads us to the final thing, which is that not only is this about the nature of our church in this age, it's about the mission of our church in this age, but finally this passage has an implication for our future. Friends, day and night, we will serve in His temple forever. We will cry out, salvation belongs to our God.

And we will live in the shelter of the shepherd who laid down His life for us. He who comes from the midst of the throne, He who is God Himself, and friends, using this beautiful language that we will see again in Revelation 21, that God Himself will dwell with His people, and there will be no more tears, no more sorrow, no more sin, and no more death. He will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

He will come and make all things new. Friends, as this is true then, let us hear the exhortation from the book of Hebrews chapter 12, for us to respond in this way. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Friends, this is where we are going. Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself, so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted. Friends, God is not slow, but He is patient, wishing that He may save more. Let us be a part of His work in that. Let's pray together. Lord, we thank You for this passage and for the beautiful vision and for the ways in which it, Lord, challenges us. Lord, this is Your people. And, Lord, through the tribulation and trials and in eternity, O Lord, may we be counted in that number. Lord, I pray that You would help us today to be captured by this vision again, and that our hearts would long, Lord, long to be in this heavenly throne room, and that we would lay aside, Lord, sin.

[ 36 : 27 ] We would lay aside the distractions of our lives, that we would not grow weary or faint-hearted, but with endurance run the race looking to You, Jesus, our Great Shepherd, the one to whom salvation belongs. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.