

“Hope Amidst Chaos” – Revelation Part 13
Revelation 7:1-17

In the midst of a prolonged pandemic, economic uncertainty, civic unrest, violence and injustice, wildfires and hurricanes, political division and distrust ... it's not surprising that people are losing hope about the future.

A 2009 research poll found that 69% of Americans were hopeful about the future. That number seems pretty good until you compare it to the same poll taken 10 years earlier when 85% were hopeful about the future. A more recent poll found that 57% of respondents believe that life for the next generation will be worse than life today. That is up significantly from the 39% who held that opinion only 8 years prior.

Last week, as we came to the end of Revelation 6, we saw an even greater sense of hopelessness expressed in the last verse: “... *for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?*” (Rev. 6:17)

In chapter 6, we saw the opening of the first six seals. And that certainly isn't a very hopeful picture as we observe the events that occur in the last days – war, famine, plague, death, devastation to the created order. No wonder those in the midst of that chaos ask, “*Who can withstand it?*”

But today we will discover that chapter 7 answers this question. John's vision here reveals that *there are those who will stand*, even in such a world. Here, we find *hope in the midst of chaos*.

So who will endure the great day of the wrath of the Lamb? The 144,000 who are sealed. And who are they? That is the question.

The identification of the 144,000 is one of the most abused topics in the entire book of Revelation. We could spend weeks studying all the opinions. We're not going to do that. Instead, I am going to address the topic briefly, but then focus the majority of our time on practical ways for us to have hope in the midst of chaos.

While there are many views about who the 144,000 are, there are mainly two that have strong support based on the text:

View #1: The numbers are to be taken *literally*. Strengths of this view:

- The phrase “*tribes of Israel*” (literally “sons” of Israel) – v. 4 – This phrase is used over 25 times in the Bible, and regarding its Hebrew counterpart in the Old Testament, it refers to the literal sons of Jacob, who was given the name “Israel” by God.
- The listing of the tribes – There is no “standard” list of the tribes in the Bible, w/ around 20 different variations, depending on the purpose of the list. The fact that there is a specific listing by tribe helps to support the claim that the numbers are literal rather than symbolic.
- The phrase “*all the tribes*” (“every” tribe) – v. 4 – Proponents of this view reference the OT prophetic passages where God promises to reunite the 12 tribes, such as Ezekiel 37:21 – “*I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. I will make them one nation.*”

View #2: The numbers are to be taken *symbolically*. Those in this camp believe that John is likely talking about *not only* Jewish believers here.

- The list of 12 tribes does not correspond to any list of the 12 in the Old Testament. The tribes Dan and Ephraim are excluded. The list includes the tribe of Joseph, yet properly speaking, there was no tribe of Joseph but tribes named for his sons Ephraim & Manasseh.
- Gentile believers are *sealed* by God in the NT, grouping them among God’s people. Seals were a mark of *ownership*; so the people here are marked out by God as belonging to Him. Other NT texts using the language of being grafted in, as well as that of the New Covenant, the New Circumcision, there no longer being Jew or Greek but all one in Christ, and sealed by the Holy Spirit, further supports this more encompassing view – that the true Israel of God is determined not by ethnic heritage but by faith.
- But perhaps the strongest argument for the symbolic view is that 144 is the sum of 12x12 – as we mentioned before – the 12 tribes of the OT and 12 apostles of the NT comprising the whole people of God. This 12x12 is then multiplied by 1000, the number of those in a military unit; and a number (like 7 and 10), representing completion ... The entire church – Jewish and Gentile Christians, God’s spiritual army, *sealed* and *set apart* for his purposes.

But whether the 144,000 sealed is to be taken literally or symbolically, the message to those who are the servants of God is the same ... *Three truths for us today:*

Truth #1: *We can have hope amidst chaos because God **knows** those who belong to Him.*

When we look at the world around us, it's easy to think that everything is out of control. But this passage just confirms again that there is a throne and that the sovereign God of the universe is on that throne and is in control. There is also a tendency to feel like I am such a small part of all of this that God really isn't all that concerned about me, or that He is so busy running the universe that he probably doesn't even know who I am.

It is true that our Creator is able to command angels to hold back the winds from every corner of the earth. But *the God who commands the cosmic is the same God who attends the microscopic*. He misses nothing. He knows everything. And by his sovereign grace, he sets us apart and seals us as his own! Knowing who our God is gives us that assurance! I belong to Him and He knows it full well! And if you are in Christ, so should you!

Jesus gave this assurance to His followers: *"I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father."* (Jn. 10:14-15)

Who can stand on that day? Those who are God's children ... they are *known* by Him.

Truth #2: *We can have hope amidst chaos because God **protects** those who belong to Him.*

The 144,000 faithful servants are sealed on the forehead with the seal of the living God. We've already mentioned that sealing was a mark of ownership – that we belong to God. But the significance of the seal goes deeper. *The seal of God means the protection of God.*

Several OT passages give us some insight into the nature of this. For instance, in Ezekiel 9, the prophet records a vision in which God is about to bring judgment on Jerusalem. But prior to that, a man clothed in linen is instructed to go through and seal those in the city who mourn over the sin that is present there: *"The Lord said to him, "Pass through the city and put a mark on the foreheads of those who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it."* That seal served as God's protection from the judgment to come.

However, God does not always promise the temporary physical protection of his children. Simply consider the martyrs in heaven from chapter 6, crying out for vindication over their

unjust death. And we recall the words of Jesus who promised that his followers would suffer for proclaiming him, many even die for it. Take up your cross and follow me ...

But while God does not always deliver His children from *physical* harm; much more significantly, He has sealed every follower of Jesus to protect them from *eternal* harm.

Paul describes that sealing in Ephesians: “*You also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised HS, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession – to the praise of his glory*” (1:13-14).

When God takes that which was dead (us) and makes it alive again, his grace enables us to turn to him and trust in him – to put our faith in Christ as the One who saves us from sin and who has the supremacy in our lives. At that moment of regeneration – the life-giving Spirit of God comes to dwell in us as a *guarantee* that we will receive in full the spiritual riches that God promises to His children. As the Holy One who dwells within us, the very Spirit of God seals and protects us from spiritual destruction.

That is why Jesus could make this bold claim: “*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.*” (Jn. 10:28)

Regardless of what we may experience in life, God has sealed us with His Holy Spirit. And because we can count on God protecting that which matters for eternity, we are able to stand, even in the midst of the chaos of the world around us.

Who can stand on that day? Those who are God’s children ... they are *protected* by Him.

Truth #3: *We can have hope amidst chaos because God **equips** those who belong to Him.*

One final purpose of the sealing is to *equip* God’s faithful servants for the task to which He has called them. [P] God doesn’t just leave us in the midst of a chaotic world to fend for ourselves. Because the Holy Spirit takes up residence in the life of every believer, He is always available to us. And one of the things that He does is equip us to handle whatever circumstances that we might face.

We don't have time for a thorough study of all the different ways the Holy Spirit equips us, but these words of Jesus provide a couple core examples:

John 14:26 – *“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and remind you of all that I have said to you.”*

The Holy Spirit equips us by teaching us – in particular, by bringing to mind the words of Jesus so that we can obey them. It is by following the commands of Jesus that we are best equipped to live life in the midst of chaos.

Matthew 10:19-20 – *“When they arrest you (resist you, ridicule you ...) do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time, you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”*

One other way that the Holy Spirit equips us is to give us the right words to say when we find ourselves in the midst of distress or difficulty. We will find ourselves in a variety of contexts, facing a variety of challenges, engaging with a variety of people, holding a variety of beliefs, expressing a variety of emotions. But in each instance, the Spirit of God goes with us, equipping us with His truth and grace – be it to encourage, to admonish, to defend, or to bless. And in all of it, we can lift high the Lamb.

Who can stand on that day? Those who are God's children ... they are *equipped* by Him.

But what about the 144,000? What is the task that they are equipped to carry out? [P] The rest of this chapter reveals it. Listen again ...

“There before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language ... They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches. And they cried out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’ ... These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes & 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 ...” (9-15)

Palm branches ... crying out in loud voices ... standing before the throne ... serving day and night. The image is loud and clear – God's children of every tribe, his faithful servants of every language, his Church gathered from all the nations – together they worship the

One who is worthy. They are carrying out our chief end – *to glorify God and enjoy him forever.* (Happy Reformation Day!)

A few important notes here ... First, if God receives the worship of people from every ethnicity, the church can by no means judge people on account of their race. Racism in the body of Christ is especially serious and shameful because it rejects people whom the Lord receives through faith in Jesus.

C. H. Spurgeon shares something else from these verses: *“If there shall be in heaven a multitude surpassing all human arithmetic, out of all nations and kindreds ... how certain the gospel is to achieve a great success!”* Although there are times when the gospel does not seem to be making much headway in the world, we can be sure that the gospel of God will not fail! The Lord has his people, and they will certainly trust in Christ. And this people consists not merely of a few men and women but of a number so vast that no one but the Lord can count them!

Thirdly, the success of the gospel reveals the power of the gospel. John wrote in a day of persecution, when the church had no political power or any cultural advantage. All it had was the gospel. The sight of innumerable believers standing before the throne shows that the gospel is enough. It will accomplish God's end even when preached by the powerless.

In short: God's people have been sealed for an ultimate purpose: To **proclaim** the Lamb who was slain for the sin of the world (*the gospel*), and to **praise** this Lamb who is worthy and reigns forevermore (*the glory*).

But John's vision here offers us one final piece. A promise is uttered in vs. 15-17:

“He who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them, nor the scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

In just three verses, at least five distinct promises made throughout the Scriptures are brought together to exclaim all the more the wonder of the world to come for those made white by the blood of the Lamb! We most assuredly have hope even amidst the chaos.

Never forget ... *It is a temporary chaos. But it is an eternal hope!* [P]

Those who belong to the Lord are *sealed* by the Lord – as a mark of his *ownership* ... a mark of his *protection* ... and a mark of his *equipping* his servants – those set apart for his purpose in advancing the gospel and the kingdom of Christ.

We are promised that there are dark, difficult days ahead. But for those who have surrendered their lives to Jesus, the good news is that we will be able to stand – no matter how bad things might get – because God knows us, protects us, and equips us – not merely in these temporary times, but for all eternity. All glory to the Father and to the Lamb.