

Revelation 7: Saving God

On October 2nd 2001, with a debt of 17bn francs, Swiss Air suddenly collapsed leaving 40,000 passengers stranded worldwide, and 5,000 people out of work in a country of only 7m. The following day, share prices in the airline fell from 100 swiss francs to 1.27 almost wiping out the company's entire share capital. Thousands of investors lost their life savings. Only a few years prior, the price had been 500 francs per share. Strangers hugged and wept as they passed in the streets, before going on their way. The nation was traumatised by waves of shock, grief, outrage, and shame. Eventually, through a combination of corporate and government actions, a rescue plan was effected and some fragments of the flag-flying airline were salvaged.

Almost exactly 6 years later, another national institution, Northern Rock, virtually collapsed in the UK. This week parliament legislated the ailing bank's nationalisation, having injected some £25bn of loans. Although the move can be justified on the basis that to let the bank go under would jeopardise the wider financial system, it also shows that salvation - the desire to effect it and the hunger to receive it - is a basic human instinct. We think of salvation as religious word, yet it's all around us - in the boardroom, the bar room, the bedroom. Some want to save the planet, others want to save their own lives. Passion for salvation is part of our humanity, and it's an indication of being made in the image of God. So what is *God's* salvation like? That's the question I want to answer from Revelation Chapter 7.

In Revelation 6 we saw God holding all things together in days of calamity. Here in Revelation 7 we have essentially the same picture again from a different vantage point - and we see how God's people are protected through this same calamity. So this sermon is about the salvation of a Saving God.

Saving God

Where does this salvation take place? Who is this salvation for? How does this salvation come? And what is this salvation like? Those are some of the questions which are answered as John looks through into the heavenly realm. Once again, as I've said before in this series, what he sees isn't a programme of future events but a picture of current realities. Let's see what we can learn.

Outline

First of all, an outline of the chapter. It begins with "**four angels**" holding back "**four winds**", which are about to wreck havoc on the earth. This vision comes straight after the earthquake in chapter 6, but it doesn't represent the next item in a sequence of events to be

unfurled. Rather, when John says, “**After this I saw...**” he’s simply referring to the next picture opened up before him. Most likely, the four winds are a restatement of the “**four horsemen**” from Chapter 6. The question arising, therefore, is how do any of us stand up through times of pressure, trouble, attack, hunger, anger or guilt? The answer is “with God’s salvation.” A fifth angel, in v.3, speaks of “**sealing the servants of our God**” in order to protect them through these traumatic times.

John then hears “**the number of those who were sealed**” - 144,000. He then sees “**a great multitude**” worshipping God and the Lamb, and he’s told that these the ones who have come through the great tribulation and are saved. I’ll talk about the 144,000 and the tribulation as we go through. Finally, “**one of the elders**” offers a brief pen portrait of the relationship between God and his people, indicating the *quality* of his salvation and *why* he brings it.

Salvation – Where?

What is this salvation? Where does it take place? Is it just pie in the sky when you die, or is there cake on the plate while you wait? In my last sermon I said that all the calamities of Chapter 6 were calamities of the present day - John’s and ours - rather than some future calamities of the Last Days. With that in mind, it would be a bit hopeless if the sealing or salvation of God’s people wasn’t also for the present day. So in v.4 he says, “**Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.**” What does this number mean? What’s the significance of naming the tribes of Israel one by one?

On the one hand, the number is clearly symbolic, yet on the other hand the naming of actual tribes locates God’s salvation firmly in historical reality. Throughout Revelation, numbers have special significance. Four is the number of the earth - four horsemen come from four corners, reappearing in Chapter 7 as four winds. Seven is the number of perfection or completion. And Twelve is the number of God’s people: In chapter 4 there were twenty-four elders around god’s throne - probably representing 12 tribes and 12 apostles. The same number appears repeatedly in the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem - itself a picture of God’s people. So 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes represents the fulness of God’s People. It’s a symbolic number. Yet at the same time, each of these twelve tribes is named, and correspond to a historical reality. The roll call John hears therefore, is a statement that God’s salvation takes place in history - your history, my history, our lives, our world, our politics, our disasters, our wars and fallings out, our everyday existence on the global *and* personal scale.

Later on, in v.14 John hears about people “**who have come out of the great tribulation.**” What does this mean? Is it some fast-forward to a vision of the future, after a great End-Times

struggle? Many spurious schemas have been charted, some in great detail with Bible references hanging off every word, which show when, where, and how this great tribulation will take place. Yet Jesus said to his disciples, **“In this world you will have tribulation. Yet fear not - I have overcome the world.”** (John 16:33) And Paul talked about his tribulations no less than 23 times - always with reference to his current situation. Most likely, in my view, **“the great tribulation”** here in Revelation 7 refers to the reality of every day Christian discipleship. Again, it locates salvation not in some mythic, in-breaking future, but rather, in the real world of every day.

I had a friend called Anita - a christian with heroin addiction. She struggled daily through great tribulation. Daily she tried to live out her salvation. Eventually she died of a drug related illness and her body was found, partially decomposed, days later. Yet knowing her as I did, I believe she died in the faith of Christ. She was, and is, among that number - holding on to Christ, and being held by Christ, through that great tribulation. Some days she was victorious, other days defeated - but that is where salvation takes place: *in* the ups and downs, *in* the chances and actions, *in* the relationships and opportunities of *this* daily life. The **“seal”** mentioned in v.3 doesn't protect us from the onslaughts of this world, whether they come from within us or without. But it protects the core of our beings - our hearts - with the seal of God. Is your heart touched with the seal of God? Do you want it to be?

So that's a bit about where this salvation takes place - it happens in *this real world*. My next question is *who is this salvation for?*

Salvation – for Whom?

John hears a roll of 12,000 called from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. Does this mean that only the Jews are God's people? To us the idea may seem crazy, but for the First Century Church it was one of the hottest issues. Notice, therefore, what comes immediately after the rollcall: **“After this I looked, and therefore before me was a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language.”** (v.9) John *hears* one thing, but he *sees* another. In other words, what he *hears* is interpreted by what he *sees* - and we've encountered this process before, in Chapter 5 of Revelation, where John *hears* the words **“behold the lion of Judah”** but turns to see **“a Lamb looking as if it had been slain.”** Again - what he *sees* interprets what he *hears*.

When John hears the 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes being called he's told they represent the whole of God's people **“from all the tribes of Israel.”** When he *looks* he realises what **“all the tribes of Israel”** means: they come from every nation, every tribe, every people, every language. Beyond the symbolic number of 144,000 is the reality of **“a great multitude that**

no-one could count.” So God’s intention isn’t that his people should simply come from one background or one class or a particular style or culture. God’s desire is for people to be saved by him from every background, every culture, every age group. No-one’s excluded. Everyone’s invited. Who are *you* inviting along? God wants his church to grow - to burst the banks so the number can’t be counted. Who are *you* inviting to join in and meet Jesus?

God’s salvation happens in the real world; it’s for everyone to receive; my third question is *how does this salvation come?*

Salvation – How?

Notice that while every nation, tribe, people, and language are represented, *not* every religion, faith, creed, or no-creed is represented. As he looks at the multitude John sees that they’re **“wearing white robes”** (v.9c) and later he finds **“they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”** (v.14) Now this is a very odd picture. Usually, as we know, blood stains things. How can washing in blood make something white? Perhaps someone could sell the secret to Persil or Ariel and then we’d all be millionaires.

But the white is symbolic of purity, and the robes are priestly. The people stand before God’s throne as worshippers. When it says they’ve been washed white in the blood of the Lamb it means the people have been purified so they can stand before him. That’s how salvation comes. We receive God’s help because we’re purified from sin, forgiven. Now most of us,

The rest of this sermon was lost, but may be on mp3!!