

REV 7:1-17—GOD CHERISHES HIS PEOPLE

INTRO: Every one of us goes through either rough times or routine times. Those times can be external or internal. Here in the West, and particularly here in the Valley, we are very blessed. So we think that life should just proceed swimmingly—from good to better to best. But then reality intervenes.

We get sick or, like some of us, have to endure chronic pain. We lose our job or our income declines. Our kids put us through grief of various kinds. We face relationship problems. Or, even if nothing specific is going “wrong,” we just feel dry. Life is a routine of work and kids and this and that. We’re busy and we’re tired and we feel like we haven’t got a moment to ourselves.

And in it all we may tend to think, “God, where are you?” Sometimes—particularly when we’re going through the wringer—we feel like we’re alone. God seems like he’s a million miles away and our prayers are bouncing off the ceiling. Other times—particularly when things are busy, routine, and tiring—God may not seem like he’s a million miles away, but it seems like he’s just kind of irrelevant. We believe in God and all that, but our spiritual life is kind of like the rest of our life: routine, not vibrant or dynamic, kind of like it’s on auto-pilot. Can anyone here relate to any of this?

I mentioned how reality tends to intervene in our lives. But it is precisely when rough times intervene in our lives or when we are bogged down in the routines of life that we need to reflect on the “real” realities of life. Today’s passage of Scripture, **Rev 7**, describes the real reality of life. This passage is particularly relevant for those of us who go through rough times or who get bogged down in the routines of life. But it is a passage all of us need to keep in our minds really any time, because **Rev 7** reveals a great truth about God and his relationship with us. It can therefore help us maintain a proper perspective when times are good, bad, or merely routine, because this passage will tell us that:

PROP: God cherishes his people

O/S: We will see how God cherishes his people as we consider: (1) God seals us (**vv. 1-8**); (2) He transforms us (**vv. 9-14**); and (3) He is with us and guides us (**vv. 15-17**). I will read the passage section-by-section and talk about each section as we go. But before we do that, we need just a little background on the structure of the book of Revelation.

Background

The book of Revelation is a series of visions. They are not laid out in strict chronological sequence but are laid out in a structure known as “progressive parallelism.” By “progressive parallelism” I mean that the different sections of the book all tend to cover the same ground from different perspectives, adding new details and emphases. In most cases, each section of the book deals with events and principles that apply to the *entire time* from Christ’s 1st coming until he comes again. The reason for this is that the book of Revelation was intended to be relevant for the whole church at all times. So, for example, the messages of Christ to the 7 churches in **chs. 2-3** certainly applied to the churches in the 1st century, but they also were intended to give principles that apply to the churches in our day.

Likewise, in **ch.5** we saw that what Christ did on the cross entitled him to open the book and break the seals. We then see him breaking those seals in **ch.6**. Each of those seals unleashes forces—war, famine, martyrdom—that occur throughout the period from the 1st century until Christ comes again. **ch.6** concludes with the end of time, namely, the sky being split apart and the great day of the wrath of the Lamb.

Ch.7 where we are today does not begin after the end of time but, like most of the other sections of the book, goes back and recapitulates the time period between Christ’s 1st Coming and his 2nd Coming, but gives another perspective of what is going on.

I. God seals us (vv. 1-8) [READ vv. 1-8].

In these 8 verses we see that until Christ comes again harm will occur to the earth and to people. But God cherishes his people. Consequently, **v.3** says **[READ]**. Who are the bond-servants? They are the church—Christians. The Greek word is *doulos* which means slave or servant. Every time that word is used in the NT regarding people who lived after Christ’s 1st advent, it refers to Christians in general regardless of their tribe, tongue, nation, or ethnic background. The same is true in the book of Revelation. It always stands for Christians in general, except for **Rev 15:3** where Moses is called a bond-servant.

That is important for our understanding the rest of **Rev 7**. Why? Because **vv.4-8** go on to talk about sealing 144,000 from the tribes of Israel. Some people think that the 144,000 are limited to Jewish believers in Christ. But I don’t think that’s the case, for a few reasons:

First, v.4 talks about those who are sealed—but the word “sealed” in v.4 relates back to those described as “sealed” in v.3—the bond-servants. Because the term bondservants—*doulos*—always is used of Christians in general, and does *not distinguish* between Jewish and Gentile believers, those being sealed in v.4 must be Christians in general, not just Jewish believers. And that makes sense when we think about what Christ has done. In **Eph 2** it says that Jews and Gentiles used to be divided, but Christ broke down the wall of division and made us into one new man. And so **Gal 3:28** tells us that in Christ **there is neither Jew nor Gentile.**

Second, the sealing of the 144,000 contrasts with Satan’s sealing of *his* followers. In both **Rev 13** and **14** it says that Satan marks or seals his followers by giving them “the mark of the beast.” What Satan does applies to people everywhere, without regard to race, tribe, or background. God’s sealing of his people here in **vv.3-4** is the counterpart of Satan’s marking *his* people. So, God’s sealing must be universal, because nowhere else in Revelation does such a sealing take place. If the sealing here applies only to Jewish believers, then the remaining members of the church are *not* sealed and protected. And that cannot possibly be true.

The seal basically implies that God owns us and spiritually protects us. Christians may suffer and be martyred for their faith—and we see this happening now when ISIS and other terrorist groups target people because they are Christians. However, since they bear the seal and name of Christ, not the mark of Satan and the beast, they can remain faithful to death and are protected from God’s wrath in the judgment.

We are sealed because at the cross Jesus bought and paid for us. And we can have confidence because God’s ownership and protection of us is not based on us—it’s not based on how well we perform or how close we feel to God. And thank God it does not depend on us or on our performance or our feelings, because if it did, then none of us is secure. God’s ownership and our spiritual protection is based on what HE did for us. And he doesn’t change.

Draw on this fact—because it is a fact. Draw on it especially when times are rough or when you feel dry. We can have a greater consistency in our lives when we don’t let our feelings determine our actions. It’s like this: the most faithful person is the one who does the right thing—and keeps on doing the right thing—even when he or she doesn’t feel like doing it. If we say “I don’t feel close to God, but I know he’s sealed me, so I’ll act as if I am close to God,” as we do that, our feelings will tend to change so as to line up with our lives.

So why does it just talk about 144,000? 144,000 is clearly a symbolic number—based on 12x12x1000. Revelation is a symbolic genre of writing; virtually every number in the book is symbolic. The same thing going on here is also going on in **Rev 21**. In **Rev 21** it says that the New Jerusalem is “12,000 stadia” in dimension and its walls are “144 cubits.” Those numbers are symbolic, based on 12x1000 and 12x12.

12 designates the people of God—based on the 12 tribes and the 12 apostles as **Rev 21** says. What John is saying in **Rev 21** is that the people of New Jerusalem consist of OT and NT believers in perfect harmony. Here, the 144,000 has a similar meaning since it is 12x12x1000. It shows the wholeness, the completeness of the KOG—and it also shows God’s ownership and protection of his people—just like when in the Psalms it says that God owns “**the cattle on the 1000 hills.**” That doesn’t mean that there is hill #1001 that God doesn’t own—it means he owns them all. So here, God seals *all* his people from Jewish and Gentile backgrounds alike.

So why do **vv.5-8** mention the tribes of Israel? For the simple reason that the NT makes clear that the church—believers in Jesus—is the new, true, spiritual Israel. It’s like the beginning of the book of James. In **Jas 1:1** James writes “**to the 12 tribes who are dispersed abroad**”—yet he is writing to Christians, not to Jews. As John put it in **Rev 1:6**, in Christ, *we* are the kingdom, *we* are the priesthood—and, as he says in **Rev 21**, we are his *bride*: He *cherishes* us equally, regardless of our background.

So the first thing we need to know is that, regardless of our outward circumstances or our inward feelings, if we are in Christ, God has sealed us. We are his and are spiritually protected by him. But second: **II. God transforms us (vv. 9-14) [READ vv. 9-14].**

In this section, the first question we need to answer is “Who is **the great multitude** of v.9? Just as the 144,000 of **vv.4-8** is a symbol of the universal church, so the great multitude is another representation of the universal church. That, I think, is clearly true since v.9 talks about people from “**every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues**” That is just as John said in **Rev 5:9** that Christ “**purchased for God with his blood people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.**”

There is an interesting parallel between the description of the church in **ch.7** and what went on in **ch.5.** In both cases John uses a “hearing-seeing” pattern, and in both cases what is identified is described by two very different symbols. In **Rev 5:5** John “hears” one of the elders describe Christ as “**the Lion.**” However, in **5:6** John looked and “saw,” not a Lion, but “**a Lamb.**” The Lion *is* the Lamb, not someone or something else.

John uses that same method of identification here in **ch.7**. He identifies the church first by what he “heard” in **v.4**—“**I heard the number**”—the 144,000, and then by what he “saw” in **v.9**—“**I looked, and behold**”—the great multitude. The two images—the 144,000 and the great multitude—are the same people, just as the Lion and the Lamb are the same Christ. The 144,000 and the great multitude reveal different aspects of the church, just as “Lion” and “Lamb” reveal different aspects of the person and work of Christ.

In these verses we see that the great multitude—even though they are from every tribe, tongue, and nation—are the new, true, spiritual Israel—just as the 144,000 are. How do we see this? First, the phrase “**a great multitude which no one could count**” in **v.9** evokes the promise in the Abrahamic Covenant in **Gen 15:5** when God told Abraham [READ **Gen 15:5**] The great multitude in **v.9** John’s way of saying that Christians—the church—are the new, true, spiritual Israel, the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant, regardless of whether their background is Jewish or Gentile.

Second, the white-washed robes of **vv.9** and **14** echo **Exod 19** where the people of Israel had to “wash their garments” to prepare for God’s presence on Mount Sinai. Israel met God at Mount Sinai while they were wandering in the wilderness. The last of Israel’s yearly festivals was the feast of tabernacles. The feast of tabernacles celebrated two things: the bringing in of the fall harvest and God’s protecting his people when they were in the wilderness. At the feast of tabernacles, how did they celebrate those two things? They waved palm branches.

In **Rev 7:9**, the great multitude is seen standing before the Lamb. What do they have in their hands? Palm branches! The palm branches are signifying the same thing for the new, true, spiritual Israel as they meant for the ancient Israelites: namely, even though we are, in a sense, in the wilderness and go through tribulation in this life—God is with us. He has sealed us. He will be with us for the whole journey—and will bring in the whole harvest.

This brings us to the fact that God transforms us—and he transforms us in at least two ways. First, he transforms our status and citizenship. Remember back in **ch.5** we saw a vision of all the heavenly beings around the throne of God worshipping and praising God and the Lamb. Now in **v.9**, here *we* are before that same throne! This is a picture of our true home, our true citizenship. Just like it says in **Eph 2:6** that Christ “**raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.**” And in **Phil 3:20**, “**our citizenship is in heaven.**”

We don’t think this way. Earlier I talked about “reality intervening” in our lives. We think that this earth is real, ultimate reality. What John is showing us is *this*—our heavenly citizenship—is “real reality.” Our stay here on this earth in these bodies with these problems—indeed, this whole earth—is just temporary. Our real and lasting citizenship is heavenly and with Jesus. When we get a grasp on that, we can see everything—both the good and the bad—in its true perspective. As Johnny Nash sang many years ago, “**I can see clearly now the rain has gone.**”

But there is another way we are transformed—we become worshippers. *Who* do we see in **vv.9-14**? In **v.14** it says that we see all kinds of people who have “**come out of the great tribulation.**” There will be great persecution shortly before Christ returns. But the fact is that tribulation always has been part of the life of the church and always will be. That’s why John said even in **ch.1** “**I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation.**” The tribulation was present in the 1st century, it is certainly present in Syria and Iraq and Iran and North Korea and elsewhere around the world today, and it will wax and wane and wax again until Christ returns.

But what do we see these people who have come out of the great tribulation *doing*? They are worshipping! Here in **Rev 7** those who have experienced tribulation, suffering, and death for the sake of Christ have borne witness in their own bodies to the suffering and death that *he* endured. Their faithfulness through suffering has demonstrated that their faith was real. Regardless of everything they have gone through in this world, they can see clearly now—and they see it has all been worth it because they have Jesus.

Awhile ago Nancy and I watched that great old movie *Quo Vadis*, about early Christians in Nero’s Rome. The movie captured a historical truth, that when the early Christians were being led into the arena to be fed to the lions, they did not go in kicking and screaming, but they went in *singing*. They could worship the Lord even in the face of impending death because they knew God cherished them. They knew where they were going. That same reality can be ours when we let God transform the inner core of our being—our attitude, our perspective on life, our values, and our priorities. Then we can turn *anything* into an occasion to worship him.

That leads us to the third aspect of how God cherishes his people:

III. God is with us and guides us (vv. 15-17) [READ vv. 15-17].

v.15 says that God's people are in his temple and he "**will spread his tabernacle**" over them. This is telling us that God's tabernacle—his presence, his reality, heaven itself—is now on us, over us, with us forever. v.17 uses yet another image and puts it like this: the Lamb "**is in the center of the throne and will be our shepherd.**" This means that he is guiding us gently as a shepherd to the green pastures he has for us.

Since that is true, we need to ask ourselves: "Am I taking steps now to build and deepen my relationship with the Lord?" I recently took a little baby step in that regard. I have been starting my day by spending some time reading the Bible in a more devotional way. I'll read a passage and meditate a little on it and write notes of what comes to my mind. I think it helps me see the heart and mind of God a little better than just "studying" the Bible. It's just a suggestion that you might want to do—and it doesn't have to take long—even 5 or 10 minutes. But it's a good way to begin the day by becoming a little more aware of God and our relationship with him.

Today's passage concludes by reminding us of our eternal destiny. **vv.16-17** talk about no hunger or thirst; they talk about the water of life and God wiping away our tears. All of those things are found in **Rev 21-22** and are a description of the New Jerusalem. What John is doing here is letting us know that, when we are in Christ, our eternal destiny of absolute joy and fulfillment—is 100% guaranteed.

CONCL: God *cherishes* us. Most of us don't really appreciate that because we know what's inside us, and we know there's much not to like. But God knows all about that, and he cherishes us anyway. In fact, he came to earth as a man to pay the unimaginable price that our sin cost—to do for us what we couldn't do for ourselves—and it was all worth it to him because he cherishes us so. And so he has sealed us and transforms us; he is with us and guides us. He has guaranteed a bright future for us, better than anything we could dream up for ourselves. So let us go forth in newness of life, and do what we can to make our lives here and now at least begin to correspond with the true reality of who we are in Christ.