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A0543 – October 23, 2005 – Revelation 7:1-8 – The 144,000 Witnesses

Upper and Lower Class in Fear. As a result, ***the kings of the earth and the chief men and the military commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains.*** These descriptions place all humanity into seven classifications. First, ***the kings of the earth.*** These are the highest world rulers, namely kings, presidents, prime ministers, czars, etc. Second, ***the chief men.*** These are the high-ranking officials who carry out the executive demands of the kings, presidents, prime ministers, czars, etc. Third, ***the military commanders.*** These are military officers who command a thousand men and lead them into battle. Fourth, ***the rich*** are those who control large regions of commerce. Fifth, ***the strong*** refers to those who have great influence over large numbers of people. This would include philosophers, educators, radio and television talk show hosts, celebrities, politicians, and authors. The first five classifications make up the upper class of society. Sixth, ***every slave and free man.*** The ***slave and free man*** make up the lower class of society. The point is that all men whether upper or lower class, whether mighty or weak are in great fear and ***hide themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains.*** Apparently, this ***great shaking*** will open up many caves and places ***among the rocks of the mountains*** for people to hide.

Their Cry for Death. ***and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb;*** Notice, they would rather die by being crushed than face the presence and wrath of the Lamb. This is a remarkable cry. This is a graphic picture of the terror and despair among the earth-dwellers.

“What sinners dread most is not death, but having to stand before a holy and righteous God” (Thomas, 456).

The Source of Wrath. The depth of their theological understanding in verse 17 is remarkable: ***for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?"*** The

earth dwellers know very well that these are not natural catastrophes but supernatural judgments of a God who is more than one in person. There is even some understanding here of at least two members of the godhead; *the one sitting on the throne and the Lamb*. They know that He rules from heaven and they know of the crucifixion and subsequent resurrection of the Lamb. This is a remarkable amount of known information for unbelievers. But known information does not save. One must place his trust in *the Lamb* to receive forgiveness of sins. They obviously don't want to do that. They would rather die than stand before a holy and righteous God.

The verb *has come* is an aorist indicative referring to the previous wrath in the first four seals. They have come to see clearly that these catastrophes are not natural but are judgments poured out by God. Perhaps this realization only came when they caught a glimpse into the throne room of God when the sky was ripped back like a scroll.

The Day of the Lord Has Come. The phrase *the great day of their wrath* should remind you of "the day of the Lord". It signifies that "the day of the Lord" has already begun and it characterizes this day as a day of wrath. Thus, the judgment phase of "the day of the Lord" has already begun. This judgment phase will culminate with the Second Coming of Christ, also known as "the great and terrible day of the Lord" in Joel 2:31 and Mal 4:5. But the day of the Lord does not end there. The blessing phase of the day of the Lord begins with the Millennium and extends till its end. So, the broad day of the Lord is 1,007 years long. The first 7 years are the judgment phase, the last 1,000 years are the blessing phase. This verse signifies that the judgment phase has already begun

The final question of verse 17 *and who is able to stand?"* is rhetorical. It does not mean who is able to stand at the judgment in heaven but who is able to survive what might be coming upon the earth. The implication is that no one will be able to survive. Nahum the prophet said, "Who can stand before His indignation? Who can endure the burning of His anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken up by Him" (Nah 1:6). This should be an incentive for Christians to live faithfully and to be looking for His soon coming and deliverance from this terrifying period.

Review: Six Seals parallel to "beginning of birth pangs" in Matt 24:5-8

		Matt	Rev
A.	False Christ's	24:5	6:2
B.	Warfare and Bloodshed	24:6-7	6:3-4
C.	Famine	24:7	6:5-6

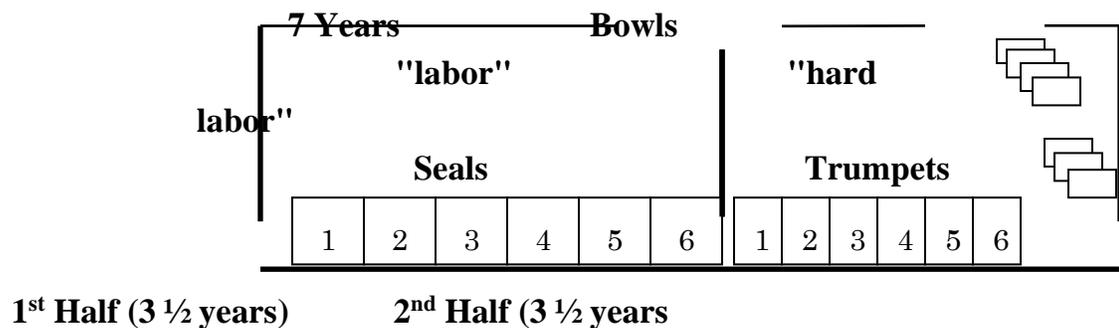
- D. Pestilence & Death 24:7 6:7-8
- E. Earthquake and Blackout 24:8; Luke 21:11 6:12-14

This observation coupled with some others is what provides the timing of the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments that I have laid out for you.

70th Week of Daniel 9
2 Divisions of Birth Pangs

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If we didn't have Matt 24:5-8 we could not discover precisely the order and span of these judgments.

The two visions of Rev 7 separate the 6th and 7th seals. As we will see the 7th seal contains all the trumpet and bowl judgments so that it can be stated that the entire 2nd half of the tribulation is the 7th seal. Chapter 7 is snuggled right in between the 6th and 7th seals and contains two visions.

- I. Who is Able to Stand? (Rev 7)**
 - A. The 144,000 Sealed Israelites (7:1-8)**
 - B. A Multitude from Every Nation (7:9-17)**

God has two purposes for placing these two visions of Rev 7 between the 6th and 7th seals:

1. To contrast the unpreparedness of the world with the preparedness of the saints. Though the world is falling apart God will protect and provide for his faithful saints. Therefore, the saints do not need to despair as the world.
2. To answer the question of the earth dwellers at the close of Rev 6: since the wrath of the Lamb is so great “who will be able to stand?” It appears from their perspective that no one will be able to survive if further judgments come upon the world.

However, chapter 7 shows that two groups of people “will be able to stand”:

1. 144,000 Israelites are given a protective seal to stand on earth unharmed by God’s wrath (7:1-8)
2. A multitude from every nation who believe in Jesus Christ as Savior will be taken to heaven to avoid God’s wrath (7:9-17)

Thus, the *one-hundred forty-four thousand* will be able to stand *on earth* in the midst of God’s trumpet judgments without being harmed. This is possible only because the 144,000 are given a protective seal. The *multitude from every nation* will be taken to *heaven* because they have believed in Christ as Savior. Therefore, even though they die, their deaths are not the result of God’s wrath in the trumpet judgments but their enemies’ hatred and full expression of hatred in execution. Thus, there are still more believers to be killed (cf God’s response to the martyr’s prayer in Rev 6:10-11). There is no promise that tribulation saints will be exempt from suffering and persecution inflicted by God’s enemies, they are only protected from God’s wrath. In fact, the persecution grows in stages against tribulation saints.

1. 1st 3 ½ years
 - a. 1st four seals
 - b. 6th seal
2. 2nd 3 ½ years
 - a. Trumpets
 - b. Israel

Under the 1st four seals the earth dwellers kill many Tribulation saints. With the realization that the wrath is coming from God at the 6th seal the persecution will increase continually through the trumpet judgments. When Satan is kicked out of heaven down to the earth the most intense persecution will be focused on Israel and in particular the 144,000 witnesses.

Revelation 7:1-8 After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, so that no wind would blow on the earth or on the sea or on any tree. ² And I saw another angel ascending from the

rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God; and he cried out with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, ³ saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads." ⁴ And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel:

⁵ from the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand sealed,
from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand,
⁶ from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand,
⁷ from the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand,
⁸ from the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Benjamin, twelve thousand sealed.

I. Who is Able to Stand? (Rev 7)

A. The 144,000 Sealed Israelites (7:1-8)

Revelation 7:1-3 After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, so that no wind would blow on the earth or on the sea or on any tree. ² And I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God; and he cried out with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, ³ saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads."

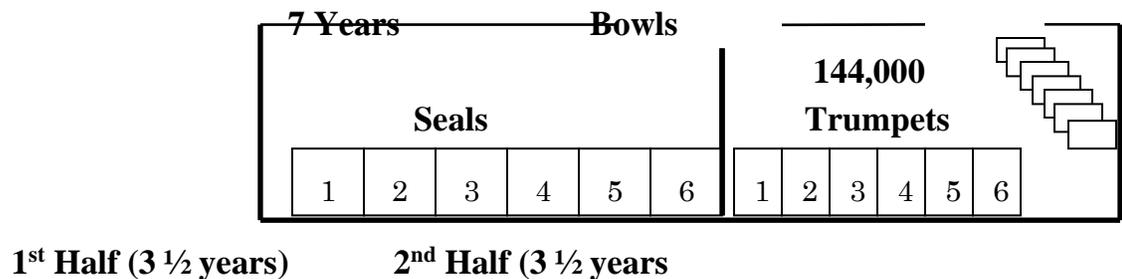
The words *After this* (*meta touto*) indicate a new scene. The big question here is when do the events of this vision take place?

1. At the beginning of the Tribulation
2. After the Tribulation
3. After the 6th Seal just *before* the Mid-Tribulation mark

The latter view is the best. The sealing of the 144,000 takes place after the 6th seal and before the 7th seal (8:1). This is just before the mid-point of the tribulation. The location of this scene in the Revelation is here to answer the question of Rev 6:17 *“who will be able to stand?”* Thus, they are sealed here in order to protect them from the trumpet judgments of the 2nd half of the tribulation. After the trumpets they may be martyred but they remain unharmed until they complete their witnessing.

70th Week of Daniel 9
2 Divisions of Birth Pangs

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John sees *four angels standing at the four corners of the earth holding back the four winds of the earth*. These *four angels* are of a lower class than the four living creatures and they are clearly in charge of the forces of nature. These *four angels* are *standing at the four corners of the earth*. The phrase *four corners of the earth* does not imply that ancient people thought of the world as a flat square. Rather, this was the ancient way of describing the four points of the compass (N, S, W, E). Thus, these *four angels* stand at the four points from which the *four winds* proceed (cf Jer. 49:36; Matt 24:31).

At each of four points of the compass one of the four winds is held prisoner by an angel who controls its movements. The mission of the four angels is to prevent outbreaks of elemental fury (Swete).

The function of the *four angels* is to hold *back the four winds of the earth* showing that they have authority over the *winds*. That they must hold (*krateo*) them back shows that the winds are struggling to get loose but are being restrained! Their restraining ministry results in no wind blowing *on the earth or on the sea or on any tree*. This is the quiet before the storm. Whenever the winds are released the quiet will disappear and great fury will prevail (7:2-3). The initial trumpet judgments are specifically aimed at the earth, sea, and trees (cf Rev 8:7-11). During these trumpet judgments the 144,000 sealed witnesses will be protected from their devastating effects.

Revelation 9:4 They were told not to hurt the grass of the earth, nor any green thing, nor any tree, but only the men who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads.

Verse 2 introduces a fifth angel that commands the four angels to restrain the winds until the 144,000 slaves of God are sealed. This fifth *angel* ascends *from the rising of the sun*. Thus, this angel ascends from the east.¹

This angel has *the seal of the living God*. There are two types of labels placed on people in the Book of Revelation, both of which are visible demarcations:

1. The *mark* of the beast
2. The *seal* of the living God

A *mark* and a *seal* are two different words in the Greek. The word *mark*, used of the beast, is *charagma* and is associated with branding or tattooing which was practiced by pagan religions. The word *seal*, used by God, is *sphragis* and is associated with ownership (2 Cor 1:22), authentication (John 6:27), and protection that leads to final salvation (Eph 1:14, 4:30). What is the *seal* on this angel? It is a label of ownership that designates this angel as the possession of *the living God*. The *living God* is a phrase used in the Hebrew (*chay el, chay elohim, chay elah*) and Greek (*zao theos*) that designates the superlative and eternally existing God in contrast to false gods which are figments of men's imaginations. This angel has been delegated authority to command *the four angels*.

Verse 3 *he cries out with a loud voice*. The last group to cry out with a loud voice was the martyrs underneath the heavenly altar. They cried out for God to judge and avenge their blood. This angel cries out with a loud voice to the four angels to delay their release of the winds until the 144,000 are sealed on their foreheads. His cry signals the urgency of his mission and the importance of the seal since it is required to protect God's slaves on earth during the trumpet judgments.

Thus, there are *four angels* who have been given authority to damage *the earth and the sea and the trees* and then there is a second group of angels who are given the mission of sealing the *slaves of God on their foreheads*. Notice the *we* in verse 3. The angel who has the *seal of the living God* and makes this announcement has a company of angels that will fulfill the task of *sealing the slaves of their God on their foreheads* before the *four angels* are allowed to damage the earth or the seas or any tree. Again, this is the quiet before the storm.

What is the purpose of the seal? As I have suggested, the seal is given to protect the 144,000 from the trumpet judgments which are about to come upon the earth, sea, and trees. "Though this seal may not protect from harm inflicted by human agencies (cf 13:7; 20:4), it must protect from all the divine plagues that come against only those allied against God (cf Rev 16:2) (Johnson)." Thus, they will be protected from Him but not from them. A parallel to this is found in Ezek. 9:4-7.

Ezekiel 9:4-7 The LORD said to him, "Go through the midst of the city, *even* through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations which are being committed in its midst."⁵ But to the others He said in my hearing, "Go through the city after him and strike; do not let your eye have pity and do not spare. ⁶ "Utterly slay old men, young men, maidens, little children, and women, but do not touch any man on whom is the mark; and you shall start from My sanctuary." So, they started with the elders who *were* before the temple. ⁷ And He said to them, "Defile the temple and fill the courts with the slain. Go out!" Thus, they went out and struck down *the people* in the city.

Thus, the purpose of the divine seal is to protect them from God's trumpet judgments. Ultimately, after they have completed their mission of evangelism the 144,000 will be martyred by the Antichrist (cf Rev 12:13; 13:15; 14:1-5).

What is the seal? The seal will be placed on the 144,000 to associate them with *the living God* as His possessions. The seal itself is found in...

Revelation 14:1 Then I looked, and behold, the Lamb *was* standing on Mount Zion, and with Him *one hundred and forty-four thousand*, having His name and the name of His Father written on their foreheads.

Thus, the seal is the name of the Lamb and the name of the Lamb's father (cf 3:12).ⁱⁱ

Where is the seal? *upon their foreheads*. The forehead is the most conspicuous place, the most noble, and the part by which a person is usually identified (Lenski). It will be obvious to whom these slaves belong and who they serve. Their witness will be visible as well as vocal. The sealing is carried out by many angels between verses 3-4.

Revelation 7:4 And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel:

Apparently, the full number had been sealed by verse 4. John does not see them but hears *the number of those who were sealed* as being *one hundred and forty-four thousand...from every tribe of the sons of Israel*. The first question is “is this number to be understood literally?” If it is taken symbolically, no number in the book can be taken literally. As God reserved 7,000 in the days of Ahab (1 Kings 19:18; Rom 11:4), He will reserve 144,000 for Himself during the future Great Tribulation” (Thomas, 474). Geysler says,

...the predominant concern of the Apocalypse is “the restoration [on earth] of the twelve tribes of Israel, their restoration as a twelve-tribe kingdom, in a renewed and purified city of David, under the rule of the victorious ‘Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David’ (5.5; 22.16).”

The second question is “Are the 144,000 Israelites or Church saints? It is silly to try to identify the 144,000 as a figure of the church. Only a theology that had decided *up front* that the church has replaced Israel would say these represent the church. Exegetical evidence for the church replacing Israel or being a new Israel or spiritual Israel is deficiently weak. The best arguments come from Gal 6:16 but even there the Israel of God best refers to the believing remnant of Israel within the church. Of the 73 references to Israel in the NT it always refers to the descendants of Jacob and never to the church (other texts often cited for replacement theologies include Rom 2:28-29; 9:6-8; Gal 3:28-29; 1 Pt 2:9). However, the text here is crystal clear that every tribe of Israel is represented, that the number is a literal 12,000 from each tribe and they are all Israelites. One argument against identifying the 144,000 as Israel is that the tribes of Israel have been lost. Though the identity of the tribe members is lost to mankind (as per 70AD when the records were burned), it is still known to God who is the one in charge of the sealing when it takes place (Walvoord). “Israel has not and will not lose her distinctive national identity before God, regardless of human proposals to the contrary” (Thomas, 478). In harmony with this are several interesting facts:

1. The church is promised deliverance from the hour of trial (Rev 3:10)
2. Only an Israelite would have the OT background to help him understand the NT so quickly
3. A high proportion of Israelites have multilingual capability
4. Israelites are already located in every nation of the worldⁱⁱⁱ

Finally, we may say that the 144,000 are *sons of Israel* and not *daughters of Israel* (for prior distinctions between sons and daughters of Israel see Dt 23:17; Judges 11:40; 2 Sam 1:24). Thus, all 144,000 will be Jewish males who are sealed to carry out their specific evangelistic ministry. Once their ministry is complete, they will be martyred as I will show from Rev 12:13 and 14:1-5.

The only thing that remains to be solved are issues surrounding the *twelve tribes* listed here in Rev 7. The most common question is “Why isn’t the tribe of Dan included in Rev 7?” A typical response hinges on an old rabbinic interpretation of Jer. 8:16 which said that the Antichrist would come from the tribe of Dan. However, if the Antichrist is from the tribe of Dan then “Why is Dan allotted a portion of land in the Millennial Kingdom?” (Ezek. 48:1-2). An equally valid question would be “Why are Simeon and Issachar absent from the list in Dt 33?” and “Why are Simeon and Judah absent from the list in Judges 5?” and “Why are Gad and Asher absent from the list in 1 Chron 27?”

Jacob's Sons (Exodus 1:2-5)

Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Benjamin, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, and Joseph

Millennial Land Allotments (Ezekiel 48)

Dan, Asher, Naphtali, Manasseh, Ephraim, Reuben, Judah, Benjamin, Simeon, Issachar, Zebulun, Gad

144,000 Witnesses (Rev 7:5-8)

Judah, Reuben, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Manasseh, Simeon, Levi, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, Benjamin

My point is to show you that it is dangerous to jump to a conclusion about Dan’s absence from this list. Besides, only 12,000 are taken from each tribe and that leaves out all the other members of the selected tribes! There are 19 arrangements of tribal names in the Bible and these arrangements all differ from one another in some way or another. The listing here in Rev 7:5-8 agrees with none of them. This does not mean that the list

arrangements are not significant. The significance of some of the list arrangements are easier to discern than others. For example, the list in Gen 29:32-35:18 follows the order of birth, the order of Jacob's blessing them (Gen 49:3-27), the order of encampment (Num 2:3-31), et. al. However, some are more difficult. For example, the arrangement of Millennial Land Allotments does not include Levi or Joseph. However, Joseph was promised a double portion and this falls under the two portions given to his sons Manasseh and Ephraim. Levi is also left off this list but that can be explained by the fact that they have a small but choice portion granted to them alongside the Zadokite portion (Ezek. 48:13-14).

In our particular list Joseph is included as well as his son Manasseh but his other son Ephraim is left off. Why is that? Does that mean the Antichrist is from Ephraim? Not necessarily. The solution to the list in Rev 7:5-8 is much more difficult. It is probable that the tribe of Dan is left off because of idolatry. All the tribes fell into idolatry but Dan was the leader in idolatrous practices. Thus, the most idolatrous tribe would be the least fit for being strong witnesses in the face of great pressures to turn to idolatry (Rev 13:12-15). Ephraim is probably left off because they defected from the house of David (2 Sam 2:9; Isa 7:9, 17) and allied themselves with the enemies of Judah (Isa 7:2, 5; cf Hos 5:3). This is also a dangerous trend for the tribulation time since they could have the tendency to defect from Christ and ally themselves with the Antichrist. However, Ephraim's father, Joseph, is included, thus including Ephraim without carrying the unpleasant connotation of Ephraim's name. To me these are the most viable reasons Dan and Ephraim are absent from this list. I do not find viable the conclusion that the Antichrist must come from the tribe of Dan or Ephraim. It seems apparent to me that the Antichrist will not be a Jew anyway but a Gentile. The basis for this is two-fold:

1. Dan 11:36 mentions that the Antichrist's descendants were polytheists (KJV says God but Hebrew uses *elohim* which is the plural form of God and often used for the heathen "gods")
2. Rev 13:1 indicates that the Antichrist comes up out of the sea which is often a symbol of the nations (cf Rev 17:15)
 - ⁵ from the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand sealed,
from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand,
 - ⁶ from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand,
 - ⁷ from the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand,

from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand,
⁸ from the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Benjamin, twelve thousand sealed.

ⁱ What is the significance of ascending from the east? The Bible says a lot about the “east”. Sometimes it is positive and sometimes it is not. The Babylonian astrologers saw the Shechinah glory moving from east to west and followed it to the place where baby Jesus was located when 1-2 years old (Matt 2). Salvation is sometimes said to come from the east. The deliverance of these 144,000 witnesses from the trumpet judgments is the immediate result of this announcement by an angel rising in the east and giving command to seal them.

ⁱⁱ Is this Christ’s new name as per Rev 3:12? What is the name of the Lamb and the name of the Lamb’s Father? Whatever these names are they designate ownership.

ⁱⁱⁱ In confirmation of this is the fact that after Satan is cast down out of heaven at the mid-point of the tribulation he will go after Israel and the final dispersion of Israel will take place. The 144,000 will have already been sealed just before the mid-point. Whether the 144,000 are already spread throughout the world or not they certainly will be after Satan unleashes his full wrath to destroy them. However, they will be protected until they have finished their evangelistic missions.

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