

BOOK OF REVELATION

Lesson 16 - Chapter 7

We finished Revelation chapter 6 to end our last lesson; so, we'll review it to get our foundation set for the fascinating chapter 7 that we'll study today.

6 of the 7 seals that sealed the secret scroll have now been opened by the Lamb and we see that the nature of the contents revealed by each seal varies from one to the next. The first 4 seals represent what is classically called The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Each horseman acts as an instigator of war and violence among humans. It is questionable among Bible scholars as to whether these 4 horsemen ought to be classified as instances of God's wrath. My belief is that these represent satanic influence upon the human evil inclination; it is that God has relaxed the constraints He had in place upon Satan such that mankind can now be more deceived than ever towards doing more wickedness than ever. Therefore what is playing out is not God's wrath but rather a great increase in tribulation; and I define tribulation as man's inhumanity to one another.

The breaking of the 5th seal in chapter 6 revealed countless martyred souls in Heaven, said to be living underneath the altar, who cried out to God to avenge their blood. While we tend to think of avenging more in terms of revenge upon someone for their offense against us that is not what is being envisioned here. Rather this is a call for God to administer His justice upon those who murdered these Believers on account of their faith in Christ. The Lord assured these martyred souls that He would, but not now. They would have to wait until the full number of all those who would be martyred in future times was accounted for. As with the first 4 seals, we don't see God's wrath present in the breaking of the 5th seal. Rather the 5th seal seems more associated with the first 4 seals whereby humankind's evil is prodded on by satanic guidance and one of the outcomes is a substantial spike in the murdering of Christ Believers.

The 6th seal was broken and the effects of it are quite different than the first 5. The first 5 have to do with an increase in chaos among humans, but the 6th represents sudden chaos in nature. Thus a great earthquake happens, the sun turns dark, the moon turns blood red, and stars fall from the sky. It must be recognized that how the ancients of the 1st century thought about what went on in the skies and in nature is quite different from how we of the 21st century think of the same things. So when John received this vision and then told others about it, they would have viewed this disruption of harmony between the heavens and the earth as a bad omen. The various pagan god systems all had as their chief goal living according to the divinely ordained structuring of the Universe. Thus the various gods in their systems were each responsible for a segment of that Universe and its structure, and when a natural event like a storm or a cosmic event like a solar or lunar eclipse occurred the peoples' response was to appease or worship the god associated with that particular event in the prescribed way so that the natural harmony of the Universe could be restored. Therefore should these foretold events of the 6th seal have happened in John's era, that is how the earth's peoples would have thought about them and responded to them.

However in modern times our response to the disruptions of nature would not be to see them in a spiritual light but rather as one of cause and effect. That is, reckless human behavior towards the environment will be seen as the inevitable cause of the disturbance of normal patterns of weather, climate, food production, sea levels, etc. As for the disruptions in the cosmos, these too will not be seen as spiritual indicators but rather as unfortunate, but all too real, events that will be explained in purely scientific terms. And in fact most commentaries on the Book of Revelation seek to explain and define the horrific events we read about in Revelation in natural and scientific terms as opposed to God supernaturally orchestrating them.

The wording of verses 12, 13 and 14 do not mean that these catastrophes happen all at once; just as with the plagues of Egypt, they will likely happen one after the other but with a lull in between each of these terrifying cosmic events, and not necessarily in the precise order that Revelation presents them. For the Believer of John's day and for ours, the fact that these devastating events are predicted in advance and happen in what is a relatively short period of time can only indicate that they are the result of God's supernatural wrath. Thus to my thinking the 6th seal may represent the first actual acts of God's wrath that we've read about in Revelation. I acknowledge that categorizing and labeling things like wrath and tribulation is a bit dicey since our definitions tend to be human-centered and might not fit God's definitions; this is demonstrated by the fact that Bible academics have come to no consensus about those definitions and categories either. So although I feel fairly confident in what I'm telling you, since we're discussing unfulfilled prophecy it is always wise to take any teaching on the matter with a grain of salt.

Part of the reason that I'm confident that the 6th seal represents God's wrath (as opposed to human evil running wild) is because verses 15 through 17 say so! There we read:

CJB Revelation 6:15-17 ¹⁵ Then the earth's kings, the rulers, the generals, the rich and the mighty- indeed, everyone, slave and free- hid himself in caves and among the rocks in the mountains, ¹⁶ and said to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us, and hide us from the face of the One sitting on the throne and from the fury of the Lamb! ¹⁷ For the Great Day of their fury has come, and who can stand?"

Note that this fury, or wrath, is coming from two sources jointly: the One sitting on the throne and the Lamb. Or perhaps more correctly, while this wrath is from God it is also in agreement and co-operation with the Lamb (Messiah). It can be hard for Christians to square the image of a mild and meek Jesus that offers nothing-but-love with the furious Lamb of revelation who is complicit in pouring out the Father's wrath on the Universe and humanity. Most of this difficulty comes from man created doctrines that deny the full character of Yeshua and instead want to depict Him as the New Testament God who dispenses only love and mercy. Here we see the other side of Christ's character as He doles out wrath that is intended to cause terror and calamity to humans on earth.

Verse 17 ends with the pronouncement that upon the opening of the 6th seal, and upon the unparalleled cosmic disturbances that pummel the earth killing untold millions and causing even the greatest warrior leaders among us to wish for death rather than trying to endure these

events, that this is the official beginning of God's wrath. So let me emphasize that should we (Believers) still be here on earth when these catastrophic things start happening in the skies, then we can confidently mark that day on our calendars as when God's wrath as described by John in Revelation and by other biblical Prophets, began.

Let's move on to chapter 7.

READ REVELATION CHAPTER 7 all

The first words of this chapter, "After this I saw" represent an immediate point of departure for Bible scholars due to the variances of their adherences to one particular predetermined doctrine or another of the timeline for the events of Revelation. For the Pre-Tribulation Dispensational folks, in order to make their timeline of the End work out chapter 7 has to be declared as out of chronological order. The most typical explanation for this anomaly is that chapter 7 is essentially a parenthesis inserted to explain how it is that God will keep His Believers from having to experience the trauma of the event that they label The Tribulation.

Their evidence for chapter 7 being out of order is that we find only the first 6 of the 7 total seals on the scroll being broken in chapter 6, but the 7th seal isn't opened until chapter 8. So chapter 7 sort of gets in the way of directly going from seal 6 to seal 7. Chapter 7, then, represents a stoppage of the natural flow of opening the seals. So, the Pre-Tribulation view is that chapter 7 depicts what happens chronologically before the events of chapter 6 happen and therefore what we call chapter 7 ought to be placed before chapter 6.

What is the agenda or motive for wanting to move chapter 7 and placing it **before** chapter 6? It is that if we go by the chronological order as we find it in Revelation then we also find the Church going through the so-called Tribulation instead of being rescued from it by means of Rapture before it starts in earnest. This is because only after the events of chapter 6 that the Pre-Tribulation doctrine labels The Tribulation do we find in chapter 7 the sealing of the 144,000 and the enormous multitude of Christ followers dressed in white robes. And these are thought by the Pre-Tribulation adherents as being those who were Raptured away before the beginning of The Tribulation.

Bottom line: if we take chapter 7 and move it to before chapter 6, then the Pre-Tribulation doctrine works chronologically; if we do not agree to that then their timeline doesn't work. To be clear: I'm not saying that it is impossible for the Pre-Tribulation folks to be right. However such gross restructuring of Holy Scripture for the purpose of making their preferred End Times doctrine work out seems dubious at best. And then there is the issue that never in the history of the Bible has the Lord removed His people from the midst of persecution and tribulation; rather they (we!) have suffered through it by our evermore reliance upon God's grace. Only after the oppression, or to perhaps end the oppression, does the Lord turn His wrath upon the people who harshly treated His elect and He did this for the sake of justice. Therefore in addition to needing a gross restructuring of the Bible itself, God's pattern of allowing His people to go through tribulation would have to be broken in order for us to find in Revelation an assured escape for Christians from the ravages of oppression and tribulation that is coming for the entire world. As much as I hope I'm wrong and they're right (because I'd much rather NOT

go through oppression and tribulation), I can find no Scriptural basis to adopt the Pre-Tribulation Rapture doctrine (and every reason not to).

Besides, as I demonstrated in earlier lessons there are no such things in the Bible as named events called The Tribulation and The Great Tribulation; these are human literary inventions needed to create a new doctrine about the timing of the Rapture. My research shows that such a concept never existed among the Early Church Fathers who commented on John's Book of Revelation. In fact history tells us that it was John Nelson Darby (of Darby Bible fame) in 1827.....less than 200 years ago.... who first came up with the concepts of named End Times events called The Tribulation and The Great Tribulation as they were the keystones of his new Pre-Tribulation Rapture doctrine.

Since I don't agree with Darby for the present we shall proceed with chapters 6 and 7 not only remaining right where we find them, but also with the events spoken of in them remaining in the chronological order that we find them. I can find no criteria (so far) to question their order that requires us to reshuffle the deck.

In chapter 7 verse 1 John says that he saw 4 angels standing at the 4 corners of the earth. This represents the way that the ancients imagined the earth: as more or less a square that therefore has corners. Ancient Israelites generally agreed with that thinking but they also conceived of Jerusalem as earth's center. The number 4 in the Bible regularly symbolizes the 4 compass directions. Therefore usually when we find the number 4 in Scripture the intent is to indicate that the action is inclusive of the entire planet.

In our case the scene is of 4 unnamed, unclassified angels who are in charge of the winds that blow across our planet. These 4 angels are ordered to hold back the winds so that no wind at all would blow across our continental land masses or over the seas and oceans. Here, once again, it is common among Bible commentators to resort to allegory in their interpretation. If there is such a thing as a majority opinion on this passage it is that the 4 winds are not actual wind (the movement of air) but rather it represent 4 spirits; there's a couple of reasons for this. First, in Hebrew the term *ruach* means both spirit and wind so the context must help us determine which meaning to apply. Second, if we can take the meaning of "wind" as figurative of "spirit" then we can connect that to the 4 horsemen of chapter 6 that are spirits, since decidedly those 4 horsemen are not real, tangible, physical men and horses. That theory works provided we ignore the last half of verse 1 that says: **"....so that no wind would blow on the land, on the sea, or on any tree"**. It becomes rather nonsensical should we say that no **spirit** would blow on the land, the sea, or any tree. So "wind" is the correct translation and logical meaning. What is being predicted is that literally all winds on this planet suddenly cease for a protracted period of time. How might such a weather event affect us?

In the days when all ocean transportation of goods and people were on wind-powered sailing vessels there was little greater fear than experiencing a doldrums. A doldrums is the complete stagnation of moving air; that meant that a ship's only movement might be on account of drifting with whatever ocean current they might be in. There are many sea tales of ships remaining in a doldrums for so long that much of the crew went mad, committed mutiny, or even starved to death. Further, the absence of wind meant no storms would blow in so that

they could get the rain they counted on to replenish their drinking water.

Our planet's weather is completely held hostage to the winds. If the winds everywhere were to cease, the Earth's unequal heating distribution would eventually result in a huge increase in the temperature differences between our frigid poles and our hot equator, as well as between the land and the sea, eventually to the point where most of the Earth's surface wouldn't be able to support life as we know it. Cold regions would become extremely cold, and warm regions would become extremely hot. So when this stoppage of air flow worldwide happens it is going to be devastating to nature and to humans.

Verse 2 speaks of another and different angel; this one comes from the east. Why east?

^{CJB} Ezekiel 43:1 *After this, he brought me to the gate facing east. ² There I saw the glory of the God of Isra'el approaching from the east. His voice was like the sound of rushing water, and the earth shone with his glory.*

East is always the most important direction in the Bible. East was the traditional direction from which the divine manifestation came. The Temple on earth faced east. So just as numbers have significance and often form a repeating pattern in the Bible, so do compass directions. This new angel brought with him a seal, from God, and told the 4 angels who controlled all the winds on the planet to wait a little while before they held back the winds, until this other angel had a chance to seal God's servants on their foreheads. Those who would be sealed would number 144,000 and come from every tribe of the people of Israel. Once again Bible commentators go multiple directions on trying to discern just who this 144,000 is; is this to be taken literally or symbolically? If there is anything approaching a majority opinion it is that the number and the people who get sealed are symbolic. That is, it will be an unspecified number of people that get sealed and protected but they will **not** be Israelites; they will be gentile Christians.....the Church.

There are several aspects of these passages to discuss; but first, what does it mean to be "sealed"? Actually there is also no consensus on this, but if we are to use the Bible to define itself (usually the best option) then we must look to a similar passage found in Ezekiel.

^{CJB} Ezekiel 9:1 *Then he cried loudly right in my ears: "Summon the commanders of the city, each holding his weapon of destruction." ² At once, six men approached on the path from the upper gate, to the north, each man holding his weapon of destruction. Among them was a man clothed in linen, with a scribe's writing equipment at his waist. They entered and stood by the bronze altar.*

³ *Then the glory of the God of Isra'el was made to go up from over the keruv, where it had been, to the threshold of the house. He called to the man clothed in linen, who had the scribe's writing equipment at his waist. ⁴ ADONAI said to him, "Go throughout the city, through all Yerushalayim, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who are sighing and crying over all the disgusting practices that are being committed in it."*

⁵ *To the others I heard him say, "Go through the city after him and strike! Don't let your*

eye spare; have no pity! ⁶ Kill old men, young men, girls, little children, women-slaughter them all! But don't go near anyone with the mark. Begin at my sanctuary." They began with the leaders in front of the house.

The usual use for a seal in ancient times was for a king or an aristocrat to claim his ownership over something by affixing his recognized personal name to it. This was essentially a No Trespassing sign. So in the Ezekiel passage, before all these people were to be killed at God's orders (mostly Israelites living in Jerusalem), those who refused to participate in the idolatry of their brothers were to be set apart for God by a mark placed on their foreheads by what must have been angels. Then other angels were to go throughout the city killing everyone...including women and children, even Priests and Levites...but they were not to harm anyone with God's mark on them. It seems clear enough to me that we should apply the general meaning of the Ezekiel passage to our understanding of Revelation 7:3.

As for the number 144,000; it is a very specific number and how, exactly, that number was arrived at is spelled out for us. It consists of 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel. There can be no good reason to allegorize the 144,000 nor is there a reasonable context in which to make it figurative; it means what it says. That said, any time we find large round numbers in the Bible we aren't to take them as precise. That is, perhaps (for example) 11,920 will be the actual number for one tribe and 12, 240 for another. And the 144,000 may not be precise, but rather only very close. This desire for absolute precision of numbers is modern Western thinking and not how the ancients thought about it. Further we find this group of 144,000 mentioned again in Revelation 14:1.

CJB Revelation 14:1 Then I looked, and there was the Lamb standing on Mount Tziyon; and with him were 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads.

There can be no doubt that Revelation 7:4 and 14:1 are referring to the same group of people. And since a seal is for declaring ownership, so we see in Revelation 14:1 that the 144,000 are owned (so to speak) by the Lamb and the Father. So who are these who are sealed? Now you would think that not only since we're explicitly told that these are from "every tribe of Israel", but also each tribe is listed by name and the number sealed is also listed (it's the same amount for each tribe), that the matter would be settled; but no. Mainstream Christianity claims that the 144,000 cannot be Israelites at all but rather they must be gentile Christians!

G.K. Beale, an excellent scholar who has published perhaps the most authoritative Christian Bible commentary on the Book of Revelation, of course addresses the important matter of the identity of the 144,000. I'll make an extensive quote because one of the most controversial issues within Revelation is exactly who the 144,000 is. As some of you might know, for many decades Jehovah's Witnesses claimed they were the 144,000.

Here is what Professor Beale says: ***"The community of the redeemed in Revelation 7:3 - 8 is the same as in 14:1-4 because of the verbal parallels and ideas observed above. In 14:3-4, the 144,000 are those 'who had been purchased from among men as first fruits to God'. And there is a parallel between 14:4 and 5:9 which is so close that the groups***

mentioned as purchased in both are probably identical (in 5:9 the Lamb purchased for God....men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation). This would mean that the 144,000 in 14:1-3 are not some small remnant of ethnic Israelites but another way of speaking of the larger remnant of humanity living during the Church Age whom Christ redeemed from throughout the world. If this identification is correct, then the 144,000 of in Revelation 7:3-8 must also represent the same redeemed remnant from all over the earth.....This group is numbered as 144,000 to emphasize figuratively that this is a picture of the Church in its entirety".

In other words, Beale says that since in Revelation 14:3-4 the 144,000 is identified as "those who had been purchased among men as the first fruits to God" , then concludes that this can NOT be actually speaking about people from Israel! In his view this cannot include Jews, Jesus' own people! Think about what he is saying! He is saying that gentile Christians are the first fruits to God and that the thousands upon thousands of Believing Jews going back to the original Pentecost are not! All we have to do is read the Gospels and Acts to know that it was Jews (aka Israelites) who were the first to become Believers in Christ and who became the first fruits to God. But Beale removes this distinction from Israel and hands it over to the gentile Church in a rather strange twist of logic. This, by the way, is the definition and the rationale behind Replacement Theology.

Even more; while Beale determines he can reasonably turn to his own speculation about who the 144,000 are in Revelation 14 because the answer we find in that verse doesn't identify any specific group of people by name, he also (for some reason) chooses to ignore Revelation 7:3-8 when the 144,000 are specifically identified as "the people of Israel", and then are identified in even more detail by listing them tribe by tribe. So instead of taking the detailed and specific identity given to us about the 144,000 in Revelation 7:3 -8 and applying it to 14:3, he does the opposite and applies his speculations about Revelation 14 to 7:3 -8 where no speculation is needed because the people are pinpointed as being from the 12 tribes of Israel.

If it was only Beale to detour to this odd path then we could scratch our heads and say everyone is entitled to his or her position, and move on from it. But this also happens to be the majority position of the mainstream Protestant and Catholic Church. And, folks, it is a distortion of plain Scriptural truth to search for some other identity of the 144,000 because the one given to us in the Bible isn't acceptable to Church leadership. Just as we have a duty to spread the Good News about salvation in Christ, we also have a duty to discredit this heretical Replacement Doctrine of Christianity that denies Israel her place in redemption history, yet is virtually taken as a given in most denominations and never seriously challenged.

Be that as it may, there is a problem that we can't ignore. The problem is that 2 tribes are conspicuously absent from the listing of 12, and one tribe (Manasseh) is essentially given double billing because of the mention of the tribe of Joseph (Joseph was Manasseh's father). Let's address this in some detail because I know it's been a long time since many of you have studied the Torah with me where the tribes are discussed in detail.

Jacob, Abraham's grandson, was given a new name and identity by God: Israel. So Israel and Jacob are two names for the same person. Israel married 2 sisters, Leah and Rachael and

also took on 2 concubines. From the wives and concubines 12 sons were produced and these 12 sons went on to become the founders and namesakes of the 12 tribes of Israel. However because of a famine where they were living in Canaan and in other parts of the Middle East and North Africa, Jacob moved his family to Egypt and to a happy reuniting with the son he thought he had lost forever: Joseph.

As Jacob got very old, he wanted to bestow the traditional blessing upon his two grandsons, the sons of Joseph. Their names were Ephraim and Manasseh. However to Joseph's shock, Jacob not only blessed them he also adopted them as his own sons. So for a time down in Egypt, there were essentially 14 tribes of Israel: the original 12 sons of Jacob plus his 2 grandchildren which he has taken from Joseph and elevated to children.....sons.

On his deathbed he called all of his sons to him and pronounced a prophetic blessing upon them all. In that family blessing Jacob took tribal authority away from Joseph and gave it to Ephraim and Manasseh; why he did that isn't stated. Thus the 14 tribes of Israel was reduced by one to 13. When Israel fled from Egypt they were the 13 tribes of Israel.

Later, during their exodus, God removed the tribe of Levi from among the ranks of Israel and set them apart as a tribe of Priests dedicated to serve Him. The Lord specifically stated that Levi was no longer to be counted among his brothers (that is, among the other tribes of Israel). Thus the 13 tribes was reduced by one more, and now they were back to 12 tribes. So when the exodus ended and Israel entered the Promised Land, it was with 12 tribes; however this 12 was not the same 12 as originally constituted. Joseph was no longer among them and neither was Levi; Ephraim and Manasseh effectively replaced them. All throughout Israelite history, from the time they entered Canaan and right up through today, it is that modified group of 12 tribes that is the 12 tribes of Israel.

However here in Revelation chapter 7 we get yet another modification to the make-up of the 12 tribes. For some unstated reason the tribes of Dan and Ephraim are no longer included, but the tribe of Levi has been reinstated and Joseph has also been readmitted to the group. There has been much speculation among Jews and gentile Christians as to why this might be. As with most of the controversies surrounding the Book of Revelation there is no consensus, and I'm not sure that there is even a majority opinion of this matter. However as I conducted my research I'd have to say that most modern Bible scholars, and a handful of earlier ones, have concluded that very probably this is either John getting it wrong or it's a scribal error. That is, whatever Greek version is the latest one that our New Testaments are taken from, this list of tribes contains errors. In truth, though, it is not uncommon that when Bible scholars can't find an answer to a biblical problem that they can reasonably defend, Scriptural error is usually the solution.

I have serious doubts that there is a scribal error nor did John get it wrong. For one reason since we find a few changes to the tribal make up in the Old Testament over time, it shouldn't be so surprising to see it again in Revelation. For another reason, to think that John wasn't aware of the various iterations of the 12 tribes over the centuries and all the traditions associated with it is unthinkable. And as concerns later copying of the Book of Revelation, the Old Testament makes researching and finding the make-up of the 12 tribes and how it

changed over the centuries a rather easy task and so an error would have been quickly noticed. So we're going to proceed assuming the tribal listing to be correct, understanding that just as with the first time the tribal make-up was altered by Jacob, we aren't told why. That said we need to leave the door slightly ajar in case some much earlier copy of the Book of Revelation than we have now is discovered and the tribal listing is different, or it more resembles Ezekiel's Millennial Kingdom tribal listing. I'm not expecting that to happen, but you never know.

We'll continue with chapter 7 next time.