

# SUFFERING SERVANTS

SERIES: WAKE UP



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Revelation 6:1-17

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*Revelation 7:1-17*

There's a scene I remember in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, which, as *Star Trek* series go, is a few generations ago. Commander Riker asks Lieutenant Worf to join him in a dangerous mission while warning him, "You're outmanned, you're outgunned, you're out-equipped." Worf immediately answers, "The honor is to serve!"

How do you feel about being a servant? A servant doesn't occupy a high social standing in any society, yet the Scriptures declare those of us who believe in Jesus to be servants of God. How do you feel about being a servant of God?

In Revelation 5, we saw God holding a scroll that, near as we can tell, contains his plan for healing the world, and we saw the Lamb, which pictures Jesus Christ, take the scroll. In Revelation 6, we saw the Lamb open six of the seven seals of the scroll. Surprisingly, in Revelation 7, we don't see the Lamb open the seventh seal. We'll have to wait for that.

Revelation 7, along with Revelation 10:1-11:13 and 12:1-14:20, constitutes one of three interludes in the series of judgments in Revelation 6-16. The purpose of these interludes is to show us the place of the church as the seals are opened, as the trumpets sound, and as the bowls are poured out.

## Holding back the wind

**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, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree. 2 Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, 3 saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads."**

What John sees in Revelation 7 "after this" is not necessarily what takes place in history after the events of Revelation 6. In Revelation, John reports what he sees next, not what happens next historically. There are some indications, in fact, that Revelation 7 constitutes a flashback, just as Revelation 12 constitutes a flashback.

In any event, we must always return to what Revelation as a whole constitutes: the things "that are" and the things "that are to take place" (Revelation 1:19). Interpretively speaking, it is often difficult to separate the things that are from the things that are to take place. We live in the "now and not yet"—Jesus has come, in the past; he is coming, in the present; and he will come, in the future. We therefore wouldn't put it past the Spirit to compress both the present and the future into one vision.

Should we understand Revelation 7:1-3 literally? Of course not. How can angels literally stand on four corners of the earth, which don't exist? How can angels, or any being, grasp the wind in order to hold it back? And are there only four winds of the earth? This is apocalyptic literature, which features symbolic language. The four corners and the four winds convey universality. The imagery conveys the universality of God's judgment against unrepentant humanity (Jeremiah 49:36, Ezekiel 7:2).

One angel tells the four angels that are holding back the winds that they are not to harm the earth, which has been infected by human sin and therefore needs to be cleansed, "until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads."

## Sealed servants

Who are these people?<sup>1</sup> The context of Revelation, especially up to Revelation 6, suggests that "the servants of our God" who are sealed are all followers of Jesus in John's day—and in ours also. The sealing is not limited to "some" servants; no, "the" servants are sealed.

What does it mean to be sealed? The angel had "the seal of the living God," which was to be used to seal the servants of God on their foreheads. The seal in the

possession of the angel would be akin to a royal signet ring that was used to indicate both ownership and protection. Some slaves were even given marks on their foreheads to indicate whom they belonged to.

In that the servants are to be sealed before the angels release the winds of judgment, they will be spiritually protected from God's judgment because they belong to him. They will suffer. They will be persecuted. They may even be killed (Revelation 2:10, 6:11). Through it all, they will be spiritually protected.

## **Complete and vast**

### **Revelation 7:4-8:**

**And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel:**

**12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed,**

**12,000 from the tribe of Reuben,**

**12,000 from the tribe of Gad,**

**12,000 from the tribe of Asher,**

**12,000 from the tribe of Naphtali,**

**12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh,**

**12,000 from the tribe of Simeon,**

**12,000 from the tribe of Levi,**

**12,000 from the tribe of Issachar,**

**12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun,**

**12,000 from the tribe of Joseph,**

**12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed.**

Now we're told that number of those who were sealed amounted to 144,000, a symbolic number. Twelve symbolizes the number of the people of God, beginning with the twelve tribes of Israel and continuing with the twelve apostles (Revelation 21:12-14). Twelve multiplied by twelve multiplied by ten multiplied by ten conveys both completeness and vastness. The number 144,000, then, is probably not to be taken literally. The number is probably much larger than 144,000.

The martyrs of Revelation 6:9-11 were told that they should rest until "the number of their fellow servants" had been killed. Now John tells us that he heard "the number of the sealed." Evidently, "the number" of the servants to be killed would be among "the number" of the servants to be sealed.

The 144,000 come from "every" tribe of the sons of Israel. Right away, John signals that we are not to take verses 4-8 literally, for every tribe isn't represented.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Judah, not Ruben, the firstborn, heads the list, presumably because Jesus Christ came from the tribe of Judah (Revelation 5:5).

In Revelation 7, the 144,000 are said to be "from" the sons of Israel. When the number 144,000 reappears in Revelation 14, those who constitute it are said to be not from Israel in particular but "from the earth" and "from mankind" (Revelation 14:1-5).

John has already said that the church, both Jew and Gentile, constitutes a "kingdom" and "priests," just the way the Lord declared Israel to be a "kingdom of priests" (Exodus 19:6; Revelation 1:6, 5:10). John, and the rest of the New Testament, presents the Jew-plus-Gentile church to be the continuation of true Israel, which was always defined not by ethnicity but by faith. The 144,000, then, would seem to symbolize the servants of God as a whole, both Jews and Gentiles. The number of believers is both complete and vast.

God, however, still has a future for ethnic Israel, according to the apostle Paul. The kingdom of God will not come in full until the "full inclusion" of ethnic Israel—that is, until the full number of Jews come to Christ (Romans 11:12). Only God knows what that number is. (For my understanding of Romans 11, see [https://cdn.pbc.org/Main\\_Service/2007/04/01/22857\\_4964.pdf](https://cdn.pbc.org/Main_Service/2007/04/01/22857_4964.pdf))

The list in Revelation 7 has all the earmarks of a military census (Numbers 1). But in the book of Revelation, the church fights a different kind of war with different kinds of weapons. It wins the war, but it finds victory in death—certainly not in killing, often in being killed (Revelation 6:10-11). So it is with us.

## **Offer yourself to God**

God is judging unrepentant humanity even now, but he is for now withholding final judgment in part to give men and women time to turn to him. And what of those who have already turned to him through faith in Christ?

We are the servants of God. We belong to him. As such, we serve his purposes, not our own. We do our Master's bidding, not our own. This is how we must think of ourselves. We're not masters. We're servants. We are not "masters of our fate," as the poet says; God is the master of our fate, and we are his servants. We trust that he knows us better than we know ourselves and that he knows how we can serve his purposes better than we do.

My vocation, first as a journalist and then as a pastor who teaches the Scriptures, has involved words. Before I even knew Christ, at the beginning of my junior year in high school, I accidentally enrolled in a class that involved working on the school newspaper. When my academic counselor suggested that I take the class, I thought it was a civics class that involved clipping out newspaper articles and discussing them. Only when I showed up on the first day of class did I understand what I had signed up for, and it turned out that what I signed up for was central to what would become my vocation.

Looking back, I can see that God knew me better than I knew myself, knew how I could best serve his purposes, and arranged for me to take a class that prepared me for what I was becoming. A few weeks into the class, I decided that I would be a journalism major in college.

Offer yourself to God, your master. I encourage you to make this a daily practice. At some point after you wake up, simply present yourself to God as his servant. If you forget to do it, use walking out the door as a reminder. You don't even have to stop walking. Offering yourself to God on a daily basis is a simple thing to do, but it opens you up to all sorts of possibilities. Who knows what God will bring your way? Beginning your day this way makes each day an adventure.

As the apostle Paul says, "present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life" (Romans 6:13).

As servants, we have been "sealed with the promised Holy Spirit," whose presence in our lives means that we belong to God and that we will be protected spiritually so that eternal life in the new creation is guaranteed (Ephesians 1:13). This is huge, because being a servant of God isn't easy, as we shall see.

## A great multitude

Revelation 7:9-12:

**After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" 11 And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."**

What John hears ("the number of the sealed, 144,000") and what John sees ("a great multitude that no one could number") represent different aspects of the people of God. What John experiences in Revelation 7 follows the pattern of what he experienced in Revelation 5. In that chapter, he heard an elder say, "Weep no more, behold the Lion of the tribe of Judah . . ." But what did he behold? Not a lion: "I saw a Lamb . . ." (Revelation 5:6-7). John heard of the Lion and was even told to behold the Lion, but he is never said to have seen a lion. Instead, he saw the Lamb. The Lion and the Lamb represent two aspects of the same reality. Likewise, the 144,000 and the great multitude represent two aspects of the same reality.<sup>3</sup>

The 144,000 represent "the church militant," and the great multitude represents "the church triumphant": the servants of God before death, with a mission to the world, and the servants of God after death, rejoicing in the victory of God.

In Revelation 5:9-10, we learned that the Lamb had "ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation." Now John sees the people whom the Lamb has ransomed, and they amount to "a great multitude that no one could number." These people constitute the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham: "I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore" (Genesis 22:17, Galatians 3:7, 29).

The white robes, which they wear because of their connection to the Lamb, symbolize purity and, especially

in this context, victory (Revelation 3:5, 6:11). The palm branches are celebratory.

In light of the coming of the great day of the wrath of God and of the Lamb, this question was asked: “who is able to stand?” (Revelation 6:17) Now John sees a vast multitude of people “standing” before the throne and before the Lamb. These people, ransomed by the blood of the Lamb, can stand. Rebel humanity hid from God and from the Lamb for fear; these people stand before them in awe. Anyone and everyone who believes in the Lamb can stand.

And what are these people doing? They’re joining the worship chorus of the twenty-four elders, the four living creatures, and myriads and thousands of thousands of angels, every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all creation (Revelation 4-5). Instead of hiding because of the wrath of God and of the Lamb, they sing of the “salvation” of God and of the Lamb, which involves victory over evil.

So, who are these people? One of the elders answers the question.

## The great tribulation

### Revelation 7:13-14:

**Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” 14 I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.**

The great multitude comprises those who are “coming out of the great tribulation,” which raises another question, which the elder neither asks nor answers: what is the great tribulation?

John, who was confined to the island of Patmos because of his involvement with the Gospel, told his readers that he was their “partner in the tribulation” (Revelation 1:9). Jesus told the church in Smyrna, “I know your tribulation . . .” and “for ten days you will have tribulation” (Revelation 2:9-10). Jezebel, a false prophet who was active in Thyatira, and her followers faced the prospect of “great tribulation” (Revelation 2:20). The context of the letter would suggest that the great tribulation was something that John’s readers were facing. They were already in it, and for them, it was about

to get worse. The great tribulation began with the first coming of Christ, when the kingdom of God invaded the world and the kingdoms of the world began to oppose it.<sup>4</sup>

Those who are coming out of the great tribulation are believers who have died and are now—and ever will be—worshiping God. The vast multitude includes the martyrs of Revelation 6:9-11. Individuals are able to join the multitude because of their faith in Christ, the Lamb, whose shed blood cleanses them from sin so that they can wear the white robes of purity and victory. The imagery of robes being made white by being washed in blood is quite striking.<sup>5</sup>

## Tribulation for servants

Jesus tells us as disciples, “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Paul and Barnabas tell us that “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Ever since the first coming of Christ, the kingdom of God has been coming, and as it comes, the kingdoms of the world resist, sometimes violently. The word translated “tribulation” was used in a literal sense of “pressure.” When the kingdoms collide, the servants of God, caught in the middle, so to speak, feel the pressure.

Do you ever feel caught in the middle? Do you ever feel the pressure? As always, the hard stuff is the good stuff. Serving God is not easy and worthless; it’s hard and worthwhile.

As servants of God, we will suffer. We don’t know how, but suffering is guaranteed. We *will have* tribulation. It comes with the territory of being a servant of God. All believers will be persecuted, if only by unseen enemies, who will attempt to persuade us to adopt false beliefs and thereby neutralize us. In our part of the world, persecution tends to be more subtle.

However, you’re about to send a teaching and medical team to a part of the world where persecution is more overt. It’s important for those of us who face more subtle persecution to identify with our brothers and sisters who are facing more overt persecution. This is also important: the team is not simply going; you’re also sending us. I’ve lost track of how many times I’ve been to this country to teach pastors and preach in churches, but every time I go, I tell them that our church in the United States sent us to be with them, and they never fail to be inspired. It means so much to them that you would care enough to send us to them.



We will suffer. It may seem, at times, that we're outmanned, outgunned, and out-equipped. We may be dismissed, shunned, and ridiculed. We may even be killed. So what? We are servants of the living God, sealed by the Spirit of God, and we will never stop belonging to him. Nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord," and nothing can stop us from serving our God, not even death (Romans 8:39).

If we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit, if nothing can separate us from the love of God, if eternal life in the new creation awaits, then what do we have to lose? Nothing. In fact, we have everything to gain. Live with abandon, as the sealed servant of God, as one who has nothing to lose.

At the end of our lives, what will happen as we stand before God?

## Before the throne

### Revelation 7:15-17:

**"Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."**

Because they have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb, those who constitute the great multitude are able to—and want to—stand before God and serve him completely and eternally.

Again, this represents the after-death experience of those who believe in Christ, but it also, to some extent, represents the experience of living believers, even now:

—In his gospel, John declared that the Word, who is God, became flesh in Jesus and "dwelt" (*skénoó*) among us" in the first century (John 1:14). In Revelation 7:15, the elder declares that God will "shelter (*skénoó*) them with his presence."

—Jesus, fulfilling Isaiah 49:10, told people in the first century that "whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst" (John 6:35). True, believers are not promised in a literal sense that neither the sun nor scorching heat will strike

them before death, though in the present they are protected from the scorching wrath of God. Post-death, of course, the sun and the heat will pose no threat at all.

—Jesus said in the first century that "whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again" and, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water'" (John 4:13-14, 7:38-39).

Finally, this scene anticipates the experience of all believers in the new creation, which is depicted in Revelation 21:1-22:5:

—"Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell [*skénoó*] with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God" (Revelation 21:3).

—"To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment" (Revelation 21:6).

—"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

When John became aware that no one was found worthy to open the scroll, which contains God's edict for healing the world, he "began to weep loudly" (Revelation 5:4). Once the Lamb has opened the seals of the scroll, once the trumpets have sounded, and once the bowls have been poured out—once evil has been vanquished for good—God will wipe away tear from the eyes of his servants.

## Down from the throne

Some of us aren't given to shedding tears, no matter how much sorrow we've experienced. But all of us have experienced sorrow. All of us have suffered. Whether you've shed many tears or few tears, if you're a servant of God, he knows your sorrow.

What has caused you sorrow? What kinds of losses have you suffered? How have your dreams been shattered? What kind of sorrow have you felt for loved ones or even for those you don't know who have suffered in this broken world? God will wipe away every sorrow, every tear.

The imagery invites us to envision us before the throne of God at the end of our lives. If at that point

God will wipe away tears from our eyes, there must be tears to wipe away. We will feel each and every sorrow again—only then, God will tenderly wipe away each and every sorrow, so that sorrow will be no more. It must be that in wiping away every tear, God will show us how each tear had been drawn up into his sublime purposes so that in the end, it will have been good that we suffered, just as it was good that the Lamb suffered.

Now, think about this: in the book of Revelation, where do we see God? We see him on his throne. That's where he is in Revelation 7. The word "throne" is used twenty-nine times in the book in reference to the throne of God. What do we see around the throne? Worship. Up to this point in the book, we have seen the eternal worship chorus swell until it includes a countless multitude of humans.

But in this vision, God is no longer on his throne. Where is he? He is wiping away your tears—every one of your tears. God comes down from his throne to tenderly wipe away every one of the tears that you have shed in your life. And he will be there for as long as it takes, until every one of your tears has been wiped away and you understand that he turned every one of those tears into something beautiful. Every sorrow will be transformed into joy.

And then one more voice will be added to the chorus, and you'll sing of the victory of God and serve him completely and eternally.

## The tears in your soul

Know, therefore, in the present, that this is what God will one day do with your sorrow—all your sorrow. Therefore, shed as many tears as well up in your soul, knowing that God will draw each one of them up into his purposes and wipe away each one of them.

Now, how do you feel about being a servant? How do you feel about being a servant of God? The honor is to serve!

## EndNotes

- <sup>1</sup> Up to this point in Revelation, the word "servants" has been used to describe servants of God, including members of the churches to which John was writing (Revelation 1:1, 2:20, 6:11). Such will be the case throughout the book (Revelation 10:7; 11:18; 19:2, 5, 10; 22:3, 6, 9).
- <sup>2</sup> Bernard Bell, a pastor at Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino, explains: "Dan is missing, presumably because in the Old Testament Dan was responsible for so much idolatry (e.g., Judges 18). Joseph is present but so is one of his sons, Manasseh. Jacob did indeed have twelve sons, but after Jacob went down to Egypt, Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, were reckoned as Jacob's. They became full tribes in Israel in place of Joseph. That makes thirteen. The list was reduced to twelve because Levi was counted separately. Called to special service to God, Levi received no inheritance in the land, for the Lord himself was Levi's inheritance. Yet Levi is present in this list." (Bernard Bell, "Who Can Stand?" pbcc.org/sermon-archive/?sermon\_id=741.0).
- <sup>3</sup> John uses a similar technique in Revelation 6:1-8, where he heard living creatures bidding the Lamb to "come" and saw not the Lamb but four horsemen.
- <sup>4</sup> Jesus told his disciples that they would face "great tribulation" (though unlike the elder, he doesn't say "the" great tribulation), which would apparently include the Romans' destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. (Matthew 24:21). Jesus, like prophets before him, used hyperbolic language to describe the world-changing nature of the tribulation he predicted, which, he said, "has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be" (Exodus 10:14, Jeremiah 30:7, Joel 2:2).
- <sup>5</sup> Some see "the great tribulation" in Revelation 7 as pointing exclusively to some as-yet unrealized tribulation. Moreover, some who see it this way believe that this tribulation will last precisely seven years, fulfilling the seventy weeks of Daniel 9:24-27.