

Revelation 7:1-8 – (EHV)

After this I saw four angels, who stood at the four corners of the earth. They were holding back the four winds of the earth so that the wind could not blow on the earth, the sea, or any tree. ² And I saw another angel coming up from the east, who had the seal of the living God. He called out with a loud voice to the four angels who were given power to harm the earth and the sea. He said, ³ “Do not harm the earth, the sea, or the trees until we have placed a seal on the foreheads of God’s servants.” ⁴ And I heard the number of those sealed: 144,000 sealed from all the tribes of the people of Israel:

**⁵ from the tribe of Judah, 12,000, who were sealed,
from the tribe of Reuben, 12,000,
from the tribe of Gad, 12,000,
⁶ from the tribe of Asher, 12,000,
from the tribe of Naphtali, 12,000,
from the tribe of Manasseh, 12,000,
⁷ from the tribe of Simeon, 12,000,
from the tribe of Levi, 12,000,
from the tribe of Issachar, 12,000,
⁸ from the tribe of Zebulun, 12,000,
from the tribe of Joseph, 12,000,
from the tribe of Benjamin, 12,000, who were sealed.**

Dear fellow children of God,

How much do you know about the book of Revelation? Revelation is considered by my many people to be one of the most challenging books in the Bible. It seems at times to leave us with more questions than answers, and most of us don’t like this. Many handle the difficulties of the book of Revelation in one of two ways: 1) Some all but ignore the book and just stay away from it because it is too difficult to understand. 2) Others have taken the book of Revelation as a challenge to use their imaginations to formulate their own solutions – as if God were saying “here’s a riddle for you, solve it however you want.” Both of these approaches are wrong and not what God intended when he had the Apostle John write this beautiful book.

Yes, Revelation is challenging. It takes time and effort to correctly understand its unusual language and symbolism. But God did not give us this book so that we would ignore it or make up our own meanings for it. No, God gave us this book for our comfort, to show us what is happening in the world now and what will happen at the end of this world. The challenge for us then, is to closely examine the text to see what God is telling us, and if any part is unclear, to search the rest of Scripture for a clearer answer. Revelation might seem complex, but its message is very simple: The world is full of sin, Jesus wins! And the vision before us today shows us what that means for the Church. It means that:

Sermon Theme: God’s Church Will Stand Forever

- 1. Safe From Harm**
- 2. Complete In Number**

Many false interpretations of this section are rooted in the very first words: **“After this I saw . . .”** Revelation 6 described the problems of living in a sinful; world and then describes Judgment Day – and all its horror for unbelievers – using the familiar imagery of the 4 horsemen. The four horsemen are the messengers God sends to bring war, famine, and death on earth. But it would be a mistake to read chapter 7 as the next in a series of events. Revelation, like much of Scripture, does not follow chronological order. As a whole Revelation is a grand portrait of the entire New Testament era (the time between Jesus’ first and second coming) so that, while chapter 6 focused on the terrible calamities God will unleash on his enemies, chapter 7 reveals what will happen to God’s people at the end.

John saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth. While we know that our planet does not have literal corners, we still refer to the four corners of the planet as a way of talking about the whole earth. So, as the angels are standing at the four corners of the earth, they are guarding the entire planet by holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. This wind is a picture of God’s destruction of this earth. Given the hurricane that struck recently, we know the destructive power of wind. But when God’s winds blow, they will wipe out everything on earth – down to the last tree, destroying this fallen creation in preparation for the new heaven and new earth God will create for his people.

God’s winds will cause incredible destruction when they come, but God’s angels are holding the worst back because something else must happen first. **“And I saw another angel coming up from the east, who had the seal of the living God. He called out with a loud voice to the four angels who were given power to harm the earth and the sea. He said, “Do not harm the earth, the sea, or the trees until we have placed a seal on the foreheads of God’s servants.”** Why do you put a seal on something? Well, parents, now that school has resumed I imagine you have grown tired of placing your children’s seal on their books, bags, lunchboxes and clothing. In this case, their seal is their name. It marks ownership. It lets everyone know who this item belongs to. “Marking” or “sealing” is commonplace in our world. When a child is born, one of the first things the nurse does is wrap a nametag around their ankle – sealing him as “your child.” We mark things to show possession and ownership.

And that’s precisely what the angel is doing. He’s not marking books or earthly things, but he is marking human souls with the seal of the living God. Here’s where the symbolism comes in. We know that God does not literally come to mark us with a stamp or barcode. But God does, nonetheless, mark us as his very own. Think about your Baptism or the Baptisms of others here at St. John where we received the sign of the cross on our heads and hearts to mark us, seal us, as a redeemed children of God – children who have been washed free from sin and given a new life of faith in the waters of Baptism. God, in his grace, has chosen the simple, unremarkable tools of water and the Word to adopt us and seal us as his children. And because God is the one working in Baptism and because it is sealed with his Word and his Promise – nothing and no one can take that away from you. No financial struggle or natural disaster, no unexpected tragedy or chronic disease – can remove God’s seal. Practically speaking this means that even if the worst should happen on this earth, even if someone or something were to take your life, it doesn’t really matter because you are one of God’s servants and the result is that you would get to the safety of heaven even quicker.

This might sound like a stretch, but it harmonizes perfectly with the rest of Scripture. This “safety seal” is exactly what Jesus was talking about in our Gospel lesson. Jesus promised that nothing could ever destroy the Church because the Church is not built on sinful humans like Peter, or like us. It is not built on false ideas of who Jesus was and is – but on the real, historical Jesus: God’s Son and the promised Savior. He

laid the church's foundation by his perfect life and his innocent death. His mission was to achieve salvation for a world of sinners and Easter's empty tomb proves that he has accomplished this mission. His finished work of salvation is the bedrock on which the Church stands – and nothing will be able to overcome it.

God's seal guarantees that though earthly winds may blow and nations may be at war, and bad people may scheme and godless governments try to stifle the gospel message, though the past is filled with guilt and the future is dark with uncertainty – God controls it all for the good of his servants. As the prophet Isaiah wrote: **“For even if the mountains are removed, and the hills are overthrown, my mercy will not be removed from you, and my covenant of peace will not be overthrown, says the LORD, who is showing you mercy.” (Isaiah 54:10)** Satan and our sinful flesh tempt us to doubt this and they try to lead us to question if we are really safe – because after all, the seal is something we cannot see or touch. And that's why we need to go to the one place we can see it. We see it in the pages of Scripture where Paul declares that God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: **“The Lord knows those who are his.” (2 Timothy 2:19)** We see it when we step to the Lord's Table to receive our Savior's body and blood, the seal of forgiveness that we can touch and taste. We see it whenever we remember the moment of our own adoption – our Baptism – we are reminded that God will never break his Word. No, we cannot see God's seal and quite often the uncertainty of life makes us doubt if it's even real. But every time we hear the declaration of God's full and free forgiveness, every time we receive his Sacrament, every time we hear his Gospel, every time we leave here with his blessing – the Holy Spirit is testifying that because we are sealed as God's servants, we are safe from harm.

And now things get really interesting: **“And I heard the number of those sealed: 144,000 sealed from all the tribes of the people of Israel.”** There are two popular misinterpretations of this passage. The first, taught by Jehovah's Witnesses, is the teaching that 144,000 believers who have received a special “anointing” will go to heaven to be with Christ, all other believers will experience a second-tier paradise on earth, and unbelievers will simply cease to exist. The second false teaching, which is sadly spread by many Christians who teach the false doctrine that when Jesus returns he will call a literal 144,000 Jews from the tribes of Israel to be sealed for salvation. Now, could God do those things? Could he decide to take 144,000 specially “anointed” believers or take 144,000 Jews to be with him in heaven? Certainly. He's God. But that's not the question. The question is whether that is what God intends to say here.

Remember, much of Revelation is symbolic – so that we will always get into trouble if we try to read it literally. The tribes and numbers here are symbols of something larger and greater. How do we know? Well, no other listing of the literal, historical twelve tribes of Israel in the entire Bible lists them in this fashion. Two of the original 12 tribes – Dan and Ephraim – are missing, replaced by Levi and Joseph. Also, the tribes all varied in size, so for precisely 12,000 faithful believers to be found in each tribe would be a remarkable coincidence. And yet, even those are not conclusive for us.

No, our conclusion that this cannot mean that a literal 144,000 will be saved, Jewish or otherwise, comes in the verse that follows our text, where John writes: **“After these things I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing in front of the throne and of the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and with palm branches in their hands.” (Revelation 7:9)** 144,000 symbolizes the great multitude that no one could count, emphasizing that everyone God elected to salvation will, in fact, be saved. When we allow Scripture to interpret Scripture we see that this is not a literal picture of historical Israel but a symbolic picture of the entire Church on earth –

which are those who belong to God not by virtue of their race but through faith in Christ. (see Romans 9:8)

The most important question then is: How do I know that I belong to that number, sealed as God's servant, safe and sound in Christ's church. It isn't because of who we are or what we have done. With the 10 commandments still ringing in our ears, we know that we don't deserve to be counted in this number. Since our Baptisms we have broken God's commandments more times than we can count, we have turned our backs on his Word and Sacraments, we have rejected his will for our lives. If we were to ask those closest to us if our faith is evident in our lives, we would be ashamed at the answer. If we were asked if we live every day confident that God will keep us safe from all harm, we would have to confess that the dangers and temptations of the world have shaken our confidence. If it's up to us, we could never be certain that we will be counted among God's sealed and saved saints on the Last Day.

Thank God that our lives, our performance, even our faith are not the foundation of salvation. Christ is. His death washes away every last one of our sins. His perfect life is the white robe of holiness that covers us. His promises and power keep us safe in this life and will carry us to the next. The number of believers is complete, not because of anything we have done – but because of what Christ has done for us. How appropriate it is, then, that the world-wide symbol of the Christian Church is not a gold coin or any pledge or promise we might make – but the cross. The cross where Christ paid for the sins of the world is what makes us certain that we are counted among God's chosen saints. The cross of Christ, who lives and reigns with his Father ruling all things for the benefit of the Church, is what guarantees that God's church will stand forever, will be complete in number – and that not a single one of his saints will be forgotten.

Revelation can be a difficult book – if you try to impose your own meaning on it or if you expect it to say something different from the rest of the Bible. It doesn't. Revelation resounds with the exact same message the rest of the Bible does: it tells us that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. It tells us that the Christian Church is built on the rock-solid foundation of his life, death, and resurrection. It tells us that those who have been sealed as God's servants through faith are safe from all harm and that not one of them will be missed by our all-seeing, all-knowing God. It tells us that Christ's bride, the church, will stand forever – and not even the gates of hell can overcome it. Amen.