

“Who Will Stand in the Great Day of the Lord?”

Revelation 7:1-17

November 23, 2008

The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

Six of the seven seals having been broken, chapter six ended, as we saw last time, with the world terror-stricken in expectation of the judgment of the Lord. All that remains is for the Lamb to break the seventh seal, open the scroll and consummate the plan of God for the world. But we must wait until chapter 8 for that moment. First we are given to see something in heaven. The last word we heard was the terrified and despairing cry of those now finally face to face with the revealed presence of the just and holy God: “Who can stand?” In the vision reported in chapter seven John answers that question. There *are* some who can stand and who *will* stand, indeed a great multitude that will stand through all the shocks of life in this world and even through the final judgment of the Lord.

Before John continues his account of the breaking of the seals he interposes an interlude or parenthesis. He interrupts the flow of his narrative to insert some essential background. In the present case, we go back to pick up the situation of the church as she stands, together with the world, on the threshold of the great trial that will come upon mankind at the end of the age and we move forward to see what will become of the church and where she will be at the end. What will become *of her*?

Text Comment

v.3 In the dramatic imagery of apocalyptic literature the point of the first three verses is that the judgment of the world is stayed *until* God’s people are sealed.

v.4 The significance of this “seal,” which seems obvious enough in the context – a protection from the harm that God’s judgment will bring upon the earth – is made still clearer in 9:4 where we read that after the fifth trumpet a plague of locusts descended upon the earth to harm those “who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads.” We have a similar thing in Ezekiel 9 where in a vision Ezekiel hears the Lord say to a man ‘Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in [Jerusalem].’ The mark would protect them from the judgment that was about to befall the city as the Passover blood on the doorpost protected the Israelites from the avenging angel of the Lord the night of the exodus from Egypt. The protection is, of course, spiritual. Believers die just as unbelievers do; they suffer the misfortunes of life and perish in catastrophes, and, what is more, the enemies of the gospel have often succeeded in killing them. But through it all they are preserved in the salvation of God; God protects the vital part, the soul! [Osborne, 302]

God is about to visit the earth with his wrath, but on the earth, mixed among the unbelieving and the godless, are his people. What of them? They are sealed and God’s wrath will not fall upon them. We will hear later of the tribulations through which God’s people must pass at this time, but they will be kept secure nonetheless.

- v.8 There have been, as you might guess, different interpretations of the identity of the 144,000 who are sealed from all the tribes of Israel. Some take them to be Jewish believers, others to be martyrs, but much more likely, in my view is that this is a way of referring to spiritual Israel, that is, the church. You will notice, for example, that the list as given is unlike any other list of the twelve tribes in the Bible. Judah comes first. Joseph is mentioned and one of his sons, Manasseh, but not the other, Ephraim. That means, in effect, that Manasseh is mentioned twice. Dan is omitted as well. It seems as if John intends us to gather that he does not mean the literal, ethnic nation of Israel but its spiritual counterpart, the church of God, believing Jews and Gentiles together. This is, as you know, a commonplace in the NT. “You are the circumcision,” “You are the Israel of God,” “If you are Christ’s you are Abraham’s offspring,” and so on are assertions Paul made to his largely Gentile churches. The church is Israel spiritually speaking.

144,000 is another one of those symbolic numbers in Revelation signifying completion or perfection: 12x12,000 or, better, 12x12x1000. It appears again in 14:1-3 as the number of those “redeemed from the earth.” It represents the full number of God’s people.

- v.9 Remember, the question at the end of chapter 6 was: “who can *stand*?” Here we find a great multitude “*standing* before the throne.”

The reference to a multitude from every tongue, tribe, and nation again suggests that we are here looking at the entire church, all Christians, past, present, and future. That way of speaking of the church occurs a number of times in Revelation.

- v.10 Again there are interpretative options, but it seems far the more likely that we have the same group of people here in heaven as the 144,000 sealed on earth. It is the same group viewed from two different vantage points: earth and heaven. The 144,000 is the church militant, the church on earth, poised on the threshold of the great tribulation at the end of the world – about which we will hear in v. 14 and in more detail as Revelation proceeds – and the great multitude is that same people, having endured the tribulation and now safely in heaven. White robes and palm branches are symbolic of victory.

- v.13 The question is rhetorical as the following conversation makes clear.

- v.14 It is true that some have taken “the great tribulation” to refer to the entire course of believing history in the world – for tribulation is promised to every faithful Christian and not just to those who live at the end of time – but all in all, it seems to me more likely that the distinct phrase “great tribulation” is a reference to the terrible time of intense tribulation at the end of history, the “hour of trial that is to come upon the whole world” of which we read in 3:10 and of which more will be said in Revelation, and of which the Lord Jesus spoke in his prophesies concerning the end of the age. To be sure, that tribulation is only an intensification of tribulation long endured by the saints of God. These saints were faithful to the Lord and faithful to the gospel, and he has rewarded them with the forgiveness of their sins and eternal life. So while the multitude in heaven is the entire church throughout history, it is being viewed from the vantage point of the

culmination of history and the most recent tribulation through which the church will have passed: the greatest tribulation of all, that at the end of the age.

We are reminded once again with this lovely image of believers washing their robes in the blood of the Lamb that the final victory of the saints is nothing more nor less than the outworking of Christ's victory on the cross. We also have again the interplay between the divine gift and the human accepting of that gift. The believers must wash their robes in the blood supplied by the Lamb.

- v.15 Again we have the fluidity of apocalyptic imagery. We have a temple here but no temple in heaven according to Rev. 21:22; we have night here, but no night in heaven in 21:25.
- v.17 In a striking mixing of metaphors, the Lamb is now the shepherd! These last two verses are likewise differently understood. The blessing described could refer to the intermediate state – that is the time between a believer's death and the Second Coming of Christ, when he or she is in heaven but not yet the complete person, body and soul together that he or she will become at the resurrection on the last day – or it can be taken to be a description of the life of heaven such as we are given in greater detail at the end of the book. The references to the great multitude in v. 9 and to the great tribulation seem to favor the latter interpretation. This is the entire church in heaven at the end of time.

Given its place in the narrative of John's vision, and given the description at the end of chapter 6, the scene, as the seventh chapter begins, is of the world poised to experience the day of the Lord's wrath in its final measure. The reference to the great tribulation later in the chapter seems to confirm this. However, it is just as clear that the great multitude of saints, first the 144,000 who are sealed, and then the company of the saints in white robes in heaven represent the entire church, the elect of God from every age. This is apocalyptic literature. The imagery flits back and forth across the page and particular representations come and go. The last generation on earth is therefore the entire company of the saints or at least represents that company. It is as if every Christian lived through the events at the end of time!

And that makes good sense. Nothing will happen at the end that does not happen throughout history. The difference will be one of intensification and concentration only. In the same way as it is possible to think of every Christian as somehow experiencing the great tribulation it is possible to think of every Christian as a martyr because every Christian, by the express teaching of the Bible, surrenders his or her life for the cause of God's kingdom. "I die daily," Paul said, long before he actually suffered martyrdom. We are to die to ourselves, to the world, and to the flesh and it is by that repeated death that we serve the Lord (Col. 3:3,5).

I am sure that all of us who are Christians have wished at one time or another that we could die a martyr's death. We are perhaps honest enough with ourselves to admit that we would prefer to be executed by some enemy of the gospel and for our loyalty to Christ later in our lives – after we have enjoyed the pleasures of life in this world – and that we would be particularly happy to give up our lives *after* we have been diagnosed with a terminal disease and *just before* we were to begin to suffer the excruciating symptoms or the debilitating treatments! But every Christian wishes to be a martyr, and in spiritual ways every Christian *can be!*

In any case, the encouragement of this chapter is not only for those believers who happen to be numbered among the last generation of saints to live before the end of history. *It is for us all.* We are all numbered among the 144,000 and we are all in the great multitude whose joy and thanksgiving and peace at the end of the age are so beautifully expressed in vv. 9-17. But, what I want particularly to say to you is that the encouragement for the saints that is the purpose of this interlude between the breaking of the sixth and the seventh seals holds a particularly important lesson for Christians like you and me, Christians who live in the comfort and prosperity of the Western world.

What encouragement should sustain us in the face of the troubles and difficulties of life as Christians in this world of sin and death? What will keep us motivated to endure the weariness and agony of that spiritual warfare that we must wage within ourselves to offer our hearts and lives promptly and sincerely to God? The battle with temptation is so difficult, so wearing, often so discouraging. What will keep us at this hard and seemingly endless work? What is to comfort us in the face of life's trials: sickness, trouble, sorrow, and finally death itself? How do we lift our hearts above the disappointments of life? How do we find the motivation to continue to make of our lives a true service of the Lord when we are bowed down with the weight of life in this sin-sick world that bears ever day the marks of God's judgment and anger at the sin of man and the Evil One? How do we maintain our concentration on the kingdom of God when this world and its master are continually beguiling us with inducements to make our peace with them?

The answer to those questions very likely to be given in Western Christendom and in the English speaking and American church, and in very large part in the contemporary Reformed evangelical church, is that as we trust in the Lord his blessing will be given to us in the course of our life in this world and we will surmount our troubles and find success in what we do. If we give ourselves to the Lord he will make us and keep us happy. The attraction of the gospel is first and foremost what it offers us *in this world*. Many pundits have commented on the fact that in our time the motivations that weigh with Christians are almost invariably *this-worldly*. The Lord is widely viewed as someone to whom we can turn who will make our lives better, by which is meant happier. We Reformed Christians in particular, of course, would know to say that the Lord does not exist for us and that he has other purposes than to make the lives of his people in this world fulfilling, satisfying, and full of pleasure. Nevertheless, it remains the case that few Christians nowadays take much comfort, encouragement, nerve, or strength from the more distant prospect of heaven and final victory, such a prospect as is set before us here in Rev. 7.

Now I should tell you that there are some Reformed thinkers of the serious sort, men of our own theological viewpoint, who argue that, as a matter of fact, there is very little in the way of any promise of earthly blessing in the New Testament gospel. They argue that all of those covenant promises of the ancient epoch – the promises of Leviticus and Deuteronomy to the effect that if Israel is faithful to the Lord he will grant her women children, make her fields fertile, prosper her endeavors, grant victory over her enemies, and health to her people – that all of those promises belonged to a former, more juvenile stage of spiritual history and that believers in the new epoch, being less worldly minded and less enamored of the blessings of this world, receive and need to receive nothing more than *the forgiveness of sins, the knowledge of God, the sanctifying influences of the Holy Spirit, the blessings of the communion of the saints, and the promise of*

heaven. In other respects, and in particular in respect to the troubles and trials of life, they are no more nor less likely to enjoy peace and prosperity than any *unbeliever*.

These men argue that if you simply observe the world it becomes clear that Christians, as a class, do not live longer than non-Christians. They are not, as a rule, protected from serious disease or early death in greater numbers than unbelievers. They aren't wealthier or healthier as a class. They aren't even happier, if by happy you mean the pleasure that comes from the blessings of a comfortable, satisfying life in this world. Their argument is that if it were obvious that Christians lived happier and more prosperous lives in this world because they have the blessing of God in greater measure, everyone would notice and comment on the fact. But no one does. In fact, quite the contrary. We are hearing all the time that Christians divorce as often as non-Christians and have as many financial problems and so on.

Now, I do not accept this viewpoint for a number of reasons. *First*, the blessings promised to covenant keepers in Leviticus and Deuteronomy were never absolute promises of prosperity and unalloyed happiness. The OT comments far too often on the darkness of life that even the most faithful believers encounter from time to time to imagine that believers in the ancient epoch thought that they were being promised a life without difficulty, sorrow, or frustration. There is an entire book of the OT, Ecclesiastes, devoted to the fact that life is often very difficult for God's people and, of course, many of the psalms reflect on the same reality. The promises are real, but they must be understood in the larger context of biblical revelation.

Second, the fact is the same sort of promises made in Deuteronomy and Leviticus are made in the New Testament. You find the Lord Jesus in Mark 10 promising to his faithful disciples, those who give up houses, fields, friends, and family for his sake, 100x as much *in this world*: houses, fields, friends, and family – together with persecutions – as well as eternal life in the world to come. "Seek first the kingdom of God," Jesus said to his disciples on another occasion, "and all the worldly necessities will be supplied." Paul reminds his readers of the promise of long life on the earth to those who honor their parents and so on. The promise of earthly blessing belongs to the gospel, as it always has. The Bible says so.

Third, I have seen this blessing countless times and so have you. Earnest Christians, in fact, do not suffer divorce remotely to the extent that unbelievers do. I have told you before that of those more than a hundred Christian couples that I have married through the thirty years of my ministry, over 95% are still married. Christian homes *are* happier; their children grow up in significantly larger numbers to live honorable and fruitful lives. Christians who tithe and are hardworking and responsible with their money out of loyalty to the Lord find that money brings less pain and frustration to them than it typically does to others. And I could go on and on. There *is* an earthly benefit from walking with God and from faith in Jesus Christ. And, of course, we have said nothing of the peace that passes understanding, the joy of salvation, access to God in prayer, the fellowship of the saints, the high purpose of life, and all the rest that fills a Christian's experience of life in this world with satisfaction and deep pleasure.

But, all of that being said, it is striking and something a thoughtful Christian should carefully consider, that the largest part of the consolation, encouragement, and comfort that is offered to the saints who must live in this vale of tears *is what comes after!* The greatest reason for placing

one's trust in Jesus Christ is not for what one gets *in this world* but for what one gets *in the next*. And, and this is our point this morning, the greatest motivation for living a faithful life in the teeth of the opposition of the world, our own flesh, and the Devil *is so that we may be found at last in heaven*.

This is a special emphasis of the book of Revelation. In the letters to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3 all the emphasis falls on what the faithful saint will obtain *at the end of the age*. Surely the Lord promises to be with them meantime and to help and sustain them, to enable them to endure the trials that must come; but the reason they should endure is because that is the only way for them to come at last to the throne, to wear the white robe, to hold the palm branch of final victory, to fall down with the great multitude praising God, and then to say farewell forever to hunger and thirst, to scorching heat, and to tears. *This is the first picture of saints in heaven that we are given in Revelation. It is a prolepsis, an anticipation of that great description of heavenly life that comes at the end of the book*. It is placed here for our encouragement. Stand fast, remain faithful to the Lamb, and here is where you will find yourself at last!

Do you find that prospect exciting? Are you captivated by the lyric beauty of the hymns that will then be sung to God? Do you get a chill thinking of finding yourself in that great multitude no one can number surrounding the throne of God? *The fact is many people don't find that prospect terribly exciting*. Even many Christians, if truth be told, are not captivated by the prospect of this future life. It is embarrassing for us to admit it perhaps, but, truth be told, we'd rather stay here than go there. Perhaps we fear, with Somerset Maugham, that heaven "is apt to be dull."

Our problem is a failure of imagination. We do not translate the biblical depiction into a prospect that is genuinely breathtaking, thrilling, and overwhelming. We don't take the time or invest the mental energy to do the work that is required, one of the most works of faith. It takes time and energy to bring heaven before one's eyes. As John Henry Newman once put it, heaven is not for everyone: it is an acquired taste, and hard to acquire while our taste buds still resemble a crocodile's back. An unholy person would be restless and unhappy in heaven. [Cited in *Sermons and Discourses* (1825-39), 24] But, the greater the holiness the more attractive heaven becomes, the more eager the heart to see it, the more sensible it seems that something so surpassingly wonderful should have to be fought for.

Most conceptions of heaven are pathetically artificial, superficial, and self-centered; hardly sufficient to energize life on earth. I read recently that an 18th century student of the Native Americans of what is now North Carolina discovered that they thought of heaven as being on the other side of the sun. In that country of souls a worthy brave would experience neither cold nor fatigue but enjoy beautiful young women and ample deer meat. [Heaven is usually a man's world in such contrived conceptions!] Lazy or thieving Indians would experience a different afterlife: snakes, nasty food, and old ugly women! [Cited in A.J. Langguth, *Union 1812*, 162] Like most people in our world today they had some idea of heaven (a fact needing to be accounted for, by the way), but that idea was little more than a superficial extension of life here in this world. Conceptions of that kind are not sufficient to sustain faith or to provide motivation to endure great opposition.

The biblical conception is so much higher and mightier, but you must enter into it. You must consider it and take it to heart. You men in particular, perhaps, know what it is like to be in a great crowd of people joyfully celebrating a tremendous victory. Think of the Washington State fans rushing the field at the end of yesterday's Apple Cup. I have felt such a thrill; many of you have. You can enter into this scene of the great multitude chanting their hero's praise. Many of you know the surpassing fulfillment of hearing exquisitely beautiful music magnificently performed and sung; how it carries the heart upward. You can imagine the great experience of such singing and being a part of that choir as the sound washes over you and lifts you up. And many of you know at least something of the joy of reunion with loved ones, finding yourself at home where all is and must be well; the place where you belong.

There is a scene, early in Sheldon Vanauken's marvelous book, *A Severe Mercy*, in which Vanauken, now an older man, remembers his father's house, the home of his youth.

"Glenmerle, he thought, had been a place to come home to, home from Kentucky or Florida or England, home from schools and home from college. He pictured coming home from boarding school, perhaps for the Christmas holidays, perhaps with snow all about – the woods full of snow. It would be a winter dusk with the big blue spruce a-twinkle with tiny white lights like stars, the big car sweeping up the hill to the house. Then his mother's cries of welcome and her kiss, his father's handshake, and his brother grinning in the background. And of course, as always, the cheery fire in the drawing-room, and through the French doors the dining room alight with preparations. Upstairs, waiting, would be his own room, just as he had left it. Heaven itself, he thought, would be – *must* be – a coming home." [19]

I think every human being on the face of the earth has an in-built longing for the Father's house, which is what the temple in heaven is: the Father's house. Men and women have a deep and eradicable desire for home. Men and women were made for God, were made for the love of God, were made for fellowship with God, were made to find all their joy and fulfillment in communion with the infinite personal God. So, the Father's house is home, home in all the best and deepest and loveliest senses of the word. "Home," we say, "is where the heart is." And as Augustine said so wisely and observantly, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."

That is heaven in the Bible: the fulfillment of all that human beings were meant to be in communion with God who gave them life. It is the world of love, of joy, of goodness. And that is a destination, an end, a future, a prospect worth *whatever* it costs you in this life! If only I might be there some day. And I shall be if I remain; you shall be, if you remain faithful to Jesus Christ. *John thought that before he describes the suffering through which the church must pass at end of the world, you would want to know that!*