

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Revelation		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	28		Gary L.W. Johnson
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AN INTERLUDE: THE SEALING OF THE SAINTS

“Chapter 6 closes with a picture of the powers of this world cringing in abject fear before *the wrath of the Lamb* (6:15-17). Chapter 7 shows two pictures of God’s people secure in the protection of this same Lamb. The powers of evil are restrained while Israelites are sealed with *the seal of the living God* (7:2) and while Christians are praising God in white robes and with *palm branches in their hands* (7:9; see Ps. 118:26-27; Matt. 21:8-9). Satan does not have full sway over the earth – never! He is always restrained, kept in control by the angels of the Lord (7:1, 11). And after the death and resurrection of Jesus, Satan is specifically held in check by *the wrath of the Lamb* (6:16) – that is, by the power of the gospel message of Christ and the judgments against sin and evil that come with the gospel.”¹ We noted in our previous study that the language, terminology and worldview were derived from the Old Testament. The language of Revelation 6:12-17 in describing the earthly disasters and social and political upheaval uses figurative terminology. Astronomical phenomena are used to describe the widespread destruction of earthly powers and dynasties. Beale writes: “The judgment of the world is depicted with stock-in-trade OT imagery for the dissolution of the cosmos. This portrayal is based on a mosaic of OT passages that are brought together because of the cosmic metaphors of judgment that they have in common. The quarry of texts from which the description has been drawn is composed primarily of Isa. 13:10-13; 24:1-6, 19-23; 34:4; Ezek. 32:6-8; Joel 2:10, 30-31; 3:15-16; and Hab. 3:6-11 (cf. secondarily Amos 8:8-9; Jer. 4:23-28; and Ps. 68:7-8). The same OT texts are also influential in Matt. 24:29; Mark 13:24-25; and Acts 2:19-20 (=Joel 2:30-31), which themselves likewise form part of the apocalyptic quarry influencing the dramatic portrayal in Rev. 6:12-14 (Test. Mos. 10:3-6 and 4 Ezra 5:4-8 [cf. 7:39-40] stand in the same OT tradition). All these passages mention at least four of the following elements, which are found here in the Revelation: the shaking of the earth or mountains; the darkening or shaking of the moon, stars, sun, and/or heaven; and the pouring out of blood.”² Chapter 7 opens with the phrase, *after this*, which is simply that this vision follows the events in chapter 6.

- I. **RESTRAINING THE WINDS (7:1-3).** “Interestingly, these winds are not prevented from blowing on people on *land or sea or any tree*. However, destructive winds would devastate people by affecting the land and the vegetation. The sirocco, the hot wind off the desert, could literally wilt a flower in seconds. This imagery is used often by OT writers as a metaphor for divine punishment (Jer. 51:36; Hos. 13:15) as well as of the fragility of life (Ps. 103:16; Isa. 40:6-7). Therefore, the wind became a natural metaphor in Jewish apocalyptic for judgment. The Greek is *hina mé pneē anemos*, so that the wind might not continue blowing) and with the present subjunctive stresses an ongoing wind, probably with hurricane force. It will destroy not just vegetation but also the oceanic waters. Anyone depending on the sea for trade or traffic (namely, everyone living then in the Mediterranean region) would catch the terrible implications of the added *or on the sea*

here. By placing this between *land* and *tree*, it has special emphasis. These winds were prepared to destroy all seagoing commerce and travel, thereby destroying the Roman Empire, since it depended on the sea lanes for its whole way of life. These categories also introduce the use of God's creation for judgment, a theme that will carry through the trumpets and the bowls, with the first four of each being disasters centering on nature."³

II. **SEALING THE SAINTS.** *Four angels* hold back the four winds, symbolizing that God is holding back calamities until after his people are sealed. The sealing guarantees their protection when the calamities are unleashed (cf. 9:4; Ezek. 9:4). The seal confirms both God's ownership and his protection (cf. 9:4; 14:1; 3:12). The number of the sealed comes to 12,000 for each tribe. The balanced numbers suggests that twelve is a symbolic number for the fullness of the people of God. Dan is omitted, possibly because it was early associated with idolatry (Judg. 18; cf. Rev. 22:15; 21:8). Instead, we find both the tribe of Joseph and the tribe of Manasseh. Now Manasseh and Ephraim were the two sons of Joseph. Hence, logically, we should find either Joseph listed alone, or Manasseh and Ephraim listed separately. The oddity of mentioning both Joseph and Manasseh again suggests that the list is symbolic. Some think that the 144,000 consist only of Jewish believers. But the expression "the servants of our God" in 7:3 must include Gentile saints as well. The equal status of Jews and Gentiles in the seven churches (see. Eph. 2:11-22) and the promises associated only with the 144,000 (Rev. 9:4; 14:1-5) confirm it. According to 7:1-8, the saints are known by God one by one, and none slips by his care (cf. Matt. 10:30).⁴ The purpose of this "seal," as Storm notes, "is *not* to protect believers from physical harm that comes either as a result of the *seal/trumpet/bowl* judgments or persecution or from the attacks of Satan. Let's never forget that John has described himself as *our partner in . . . tribulation* (Rev. 1:9). And Jesus told the Christians in the church in Smyrna to *be faithful unto death* (Rev. 2:10) given the fact that they were about to *suffer* because *the devil is about to throw some of them into prison* (Rev. 2:10). You will also recall from what we saw in Revelation 6:9-11 that many had already been martyred for their faith and many more would follow. As far as I can tell, nowhere in the NT are the people of God ever promised protection from physical suffering at the hands of unbelievers or from the ravages of living in a fallen world. Certainly God often does providentially and mercifully protect his people, but there is no guarantee that he will always do so. God nowhere says we are invulnerable to Satan's attack, but he does promise us that nothing Satan or anyone else might do can ever separate us from the love he has for us in Jesus (Rom. 8:37-39). What we are reading about here is divine preservation and protection of a spiritual nature. *It is God's gracious provision of persevering faith in the midst of intense persecution and suffering. The seal strengthens our faith so that the trials through which we pass serve not to separate us from God but only to refine and purify our commitment to him.* In other words, persecution and pain and suffering have the tendency to weaken an individual's resistance. What safeguard or assurance do we have that when faced with this we won't crater under pressure and deny Jesus? The safeguard is the seal of God imposed on the foreheads of God's people. The verb *to seal* can also mean to authenticate and to designate ownership of something or someone. This is surely in view insofar as in 14:1 the seal is identified as the Name of the Lamb and the Father (cf. 22:4). Indeed, the *mark* of the beast on the forehead of his followers is identified as *the name of the beast* (14:9-11). I am persuaded that the entire imagery of the *seal* is simply a reference to the *Holy Spirit* himself, whose abiding presence in Christians is likened unto *sealing* which marks them out as God's and protects them from spiritual harm: *And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee* (2 Cor. 1:21-22). *In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised*

*Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:13-14; cf. 4:30). Thus, when we read in Revelation that God has sealed his people and put his name on their foreheads we should immediately think of the gift of the Holy Spirit and his work in our hearts to mark us out as belonging to God and protected and preserved in faith no matter how much tribulation or suffering we face. It's God's way of saying: You're mine! I will never let you go! I will sustain and preserve and uphold you in faith no matter what the enemy may attempt to do."*⁵

ENDNOTES

¹E. Walhout, *Revelation: Making Sense of John's Visions* (CRC Publications, 2000), p. 43.

²G. Beale, *Revelation, The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1996), p. 396.

³cf. G. Osborne, *Revelation: Baker Exegetical Commentary on The New Testament* (Baker, 2002), p. 306.

⁴V. S. Poythress, *The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation* (P&R, 2000), p. 118.

⁵S. Storms, *The Servants of God: Sealed and Safe Revelation 7:1-17; 14:1-5* (Bridgeway Church, OKC, Revelation Number 18). Sam is a longtime friend and, like myself, was a student of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. When it comes to the subject of eschatology, Sam excels!