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Sermon Notes

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Signed, Sealed and Delivered: A Multitude Rejoicing in Heaven

Revelation 7:1-17

On October 2, 2016, Hurricane Matthew slammed into Haiti, devastating towns and villages with its 100 mph winds and torrential rainfall... entire communities were completely wiped from the map as a result of this terrible storm... yet in the midst of that nightmare came a story of a surprising refuge... some residents of a town called Lacadonie had the presence of mind to scale a mountainside nearby their town and find a small cave system where they rode out the storm. When aid workers came several days later and saw what the hurricane had done to that town, they thought there were no survivors... but that cave system had been salvation for 550 blessed survivors, who had hunkered down there for four days and nights

That image of a refuge in a terrible storm is on my mind as we come to Revelation 7

For the devastation that the sixth seal of Revelation 6 will unleash on the earth is so overwhelming that everyone on the face of the earth will be crying for a refuge, a place of salvation where they can survive the storm

This question is lingering in the air at the end of the chapter:

Revelation 6:15-17 Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. ¹⁶ They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!" ¹⁷ For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

There is a storm of wrath coming... and no cave system will be able to protect anyone

But there IS a refuge, a shelter, a protection from the coming wrath, and his name is Jesus Christ

That is what this chapter, Revelation 7, is all about

I. "Who Shall Be Able to Stand?" (6:17-7:3)

A. An Interlude that Explains Everything

1. Understand the flow of this amazing vision
 - a. The Apostle John is on the Island of Patmos, in exile for his bold and faithful service to Christ
 - b. On that little rocky island, he has a vision of a doorway opened into the heavenly realms... and the overpowering voice of Christ invites him to soar through the heavens, enter through the doorway, and peer into the glories of that lofty domain
 - c. But only by the power of the Spirit can John obey this command... and the Spirit indeed lifts him up and empowers him to do the supernatural
 - d. As he passes through the open doorway, he immediately sees a throne in heaven with someone seated on it
 - e. That person is none other than Almighty God, the Creator of the Ends of the Earth
 - f. He is radiant in glory, and his throne is surrounded by twenty-four other thrones with elders seated on them
 - g. And he is receiving continual worship from a hundred million angels who praise him as God the Creator of the universe

Revelation 4:11 "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."

- h. Then comes the dramatic scene of Revelation 5... in the right hand of the one seated on the throne is a scroll, sealed with seven seals
- i. A mighty angel proclaims the searching question:

Revelation 5:2 "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?"

- j. But no one is found in the entire universe worthy to take the scroll and break open the seals
- k. Then suddenly Jesus Christ is revealed... he comes forward, the "Lion of the Tribe of Judah", but also a Lamb looking as if it had been slain
- l. He is WORTHY to take the scroll and break open its seals...
- m. And when Christ takes the scroll, all of heaven breaks into overwhelming worship in praise of the Lamb who had been slain... Christ the Redeemer

Revelation 5:9-10 And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men

for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. ¹⁰ You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth."

- n. In Revelation 6, Jesus Christ commences to break open the seals
- o. The first four seals result in the famous "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse"... an unleashing of a series of escalating trials on the earth... a deceptive peace, war, famine, and death
- p. The fifth seal shows martyrs who have been slain in heaven crying for justice
- q. The sixth seal brings in symbolic language the end of the physical universe

Revelation 6:12-17 I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, ¹³ and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. ¹⁴ The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. ¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. ¹⁶ They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! ¹⁷ For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

- r. This final haunting question is in the air as Revelation 7 opens
- s. It is absolutely VITAL for us to understand the answer to that question... when the wrath of God is unleashed on the inhabitants of the earth, who shall be able to stand?
- t. Revelation 7 is an INTERLUDE... an INTERRUPTION in the seven seals... Christ has opened the sixth seal, and the seventh seal he will open in Revelation 8... in between is this magnificent Revelation 7
- u. It will answer the question by revealing a vision of 144,000 sealed from the sons of Israel, and then a multitude so vast no one could count it from every tribe, language, people, and nation on earth...
- v. The first vision is one of protection on earth, and the second is one of final reward, protection, and provision in eternity in heaven
- w. These are the ones who can survive the terrifying day of God's wrath that is coming on all the earth
- x. The only REFUGE is salvation in Christ... being washed through the blood of the Lamb

- y. Revelation 7 is about how God creates a REFUGE from his own wrath for the elect... the signed, sealed, and delivered chosen people of God, both from Israel and from every nation on earth

B. Four Angels Holding Back the Four Winds

Revelation 7:1 After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, 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.

1. The vision begins with a supernatural RESTRAINT...
2. Four angels standing at the four corners of the earth
 - a. This image is one of the entirety of the surface of the earth
 - b. The four points of the compass... North, South, East, and West
 - c. They have power to HOLD BACK or RESTRAIN the four winds of the earth
 - d. The result of their holding these winds back is that they cannot do the damage they would do to the land, the sea, or the trees of the earth
3. Now what does this mean?
 - a. The “four winds of the earth” clearly have the power to bring destruction to the face of the earth... the restraint of the winds is so they cannot yet harm the land, sea or trees
 - b. We should also note that the control of the winds is quite beyond human power... wind blows where it wishes, and we have no power to restrain it or control it

John 3:8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.

Henry Morris: “The circulation of the atmosphere is a mighty engine, driven by energy from the sun and from the earth’s rotation. The tremendous powers involved in this operation become especially obvious when they are displayed in the form of great hurricanes and blizzards and tornadoes. These winds of the earth make life possible of earth throughout the hydrological cycle, transporting waters inland from the ocean with which to water the earth. Yet the angels – only four of them – had turned off this gigantic engine.”

- c. Daniel 7 shows the four winds moving over the surface of the sea, churning up the sea and leading to the four great beasts that come up out of the sea... terrible, wicked empires that dominate the inhabitants of the earth

Daniel 7:2-3 Daniel said: "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me were the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea. ³ Four great beasts, each different from the others, came up out of the sea.

- d. The sea represents the churning mass of humanity in its random, chaotic, demonic rebellion against God, and the beasts that come up represent evil empires that slaughter and crush and tyrannize
- e. The image of a powerful wind... like a hurricane, or a tornado that ravages the earth should be in our minds
- f. These four winds may also refer to the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse that we just studied
- g. The image of various colored horsemen riding over the surface of the earth bringing the judgments of God was first heard through the prophet Zechariah

Zechariah 6:1-7 I looked up again-- and there before me were four chariots coming out from between two mountains-- mountains of bronze! ² The first chariot had red horses, the second black, ³ the third white, and the fourth dappled-- all of them powerful. ⁴ I asked the angel who was speaking to me, "What are these, my lord?" ⁵ The angel answered me, "These are the four spirits of heaven, going out from standing in the presence of the Lord of the whole world. ⁶ The one with the black horses is going toward the north country, the one with the white horses toward the west, and the one with the dappled horses toward the south." ⁷ When the powerful horses went out, they were straining to go throughout the earth. And he said, "Go throughout the earth!" So they went throughout the earth.

- h. So perhaps the four angels restraining the four winds of heaven are holding back the judgments that are about to be poured out on the earth by false peace, war, famine, and death
- i. Some commentators liken "winds" to "angels"... and perhaps even to demonic powers
- j. So the four winds that are going to howl on the earth are demonic powers that will drive on the wrath that God is pouring out over planet earth

C. The Proclamation of Protection

Revelation 7:2-3 Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been

given power to harm the land and the sea: ³ "Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God."

1. Another angel, from the east, rises up to make a powerful, clear proclamation
2. He is speaking in a loud voice, as these angels always seem to do in Revelation... they are powerful, awesome beings
3. He commands the four angels who are restraining the four winds of the earth to continue to hold them back until the servants of God have been SEALED on their foreheads
4. When the winds will be unleashed, they will bring devastation to the land, the sea, and the trees... but they cannot do so until the servants of God are SEALED
5. This is clearly a matter of protection... how can anyone STAND in the winds that will blow? What survivors could there be?
6. Answer: ONLY THOSE SEALED as servants of God

D. The Servants of God Sealed

1. This sealing on the foreheads is a powerful display of both protection and ownership
2. It reminds us of an earlier moment in prophetic history... in the time of Ezekiel the prophet
 - a. The nation of Israel is about to be invaded and exiled because of their sins
 - b. God gives Ezekiel a vision of a very important moment in the heavenly realms... the sealing of the chosen remnant before the judgment falls
 - c. In Ezekiel 9, God summons angels who have weapons—swords at their sides, and calls on them to stand by
 - d. Then God summons another angel clothed in white who had a writing kit

Ezekiel 9:4 "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 it."

So this angel with the writing kit is sent throughout the city of Jerusalem to put a mark on the foreheads of all those deeply grieved over the wickedness of the city

The mark he put on the heads of these people was the Hebrew letter “Taw” or “T”, the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet... in Ezekiel’s day, it would have looked like a cross

Then the Lord commanded the six angels with swords...

Ezekiel 9:5-6 "Follow him through the city and kill, without showing pity or compassion. ⁶ Slaughter old men, young men and maidens, women and children, but do not touch anyone who has the mark. Begin at my sanctuary." So they began with the elders who were in front of the temple.

- e. The mark on the foreheads is a mark of election, of a godly remnant in the wicked city that God will SPARE from the destruction about to come
- f. It is similar to the blood of the Passover Lamb that was painted on the doorposts and lintels of the Jewish homes in Egypt the night of the Exodus, during the tenth plague:

Exodus 12:23 When the LORD goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down.

- 3. So it is here... the SERVANTS of GOD are marked with a seal before the winds of destruction blow over the earth, the sea and toppling mighty trees

E. The Sealing Represents the Election of God and Salvation Through Christ

Ephesians 1:13-14 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession-- to the praise of his glory.

2 Corinthians 1:21-22 Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, ²² set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

- 1. Sealing on the Foreheads implies Ownership... and from ownership comes protection

Revelation 22:3-4 The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. ⁴ They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.

F. Direct Contrast with the Mark of the Beast

1. Later in Revelation, the servants of Satan and of the Antichrist will receive HIS MARK on their foreheads
2. This is the mark of wickedness, of participation in the evil world system that Satan and his Beast will set up

Revelation 13:16-18 He also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, ¹⁷ so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name. ¹⁸ This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666

3. Those marked with the mark of God will be saved from God's wrath
4. Those marked with the mark of the Beast will be condemned to suffer God's wrath eternally

Revelation 14:9-11 A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: "If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, ¹⁰ he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. ¹¹ And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name."

5. This distinction is clearly identified by those who persevere as servants of God in this present wicked world system... and even more, those in the final days

Revelation 14:12 This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God's commandments and remain faithful to Jesus.

Okay... that is the significance of the SEALING in Revelation 7... it is ownership by God and protection from God's wrath

But WHO is sealed?

First, we already know they are identified as the Servants of God:

Revelation 7:3 "Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God."

But, verses 4-8 go in deeper...

II. 144,000 Sealed from the Sons of Israel (vs. 7:4-8)

Revelation 7:4-8 Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel. ⁵ From the tribe of Judah 12,000 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.

- A. The Number of those Sealed: 144,000
- B. The Identity of those Sealed: “From all the tribes of Israel”
- C. Who Are these People?
 1. Right away, we can reject the Jehovah’s Witnesses assertion that the 144,000 are the select, anointed holy ones throughout two thousand years of history who are spiritual qualified to spend eternity in heaven with God; all the rest of the witnesses, the godly and faithful ones who didn’t make the 144,000 will spend eternity in a restored paradise on earth
 2. Literal and futurist interpreters (dispensational premillennialists, like John MacArthur) identify these as actual Jews, during the seven year tribulation, who come to faith in Christ and are then unleashed as missionaries and evangelists, who win the multitude of tribulation saints in Revelation 7:9

John MacArthur: “These Jewish believers and evangelists are the firstfruits of Israel, which as a nation will be redeemed before Christ returns. The 144,000 are not all the Jewish believers at that time, but a unique group selected to proclaim the gospel in that day.”

A vast turning of the Jewish nation to Christ before the end of the world is predicted:

Zechariah 12:10 "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son."

Romans 11:25-27 Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. ²⁶ And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. ²⁷ And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins."

- a. The strongest argument for this literal and future interpretation is the specificity of the Twelve Tribes mentioned
- b. John MacArthur points out that if the 144,000 represents the CHURCH, this would make there be some absurd division of the church into twelve tribes in a way that makes no sense

- c. He also says there is no exegetical reason not to interpret the 144,000 literally
- 3. Others believe these represent Jewish martyrs who will die in the Great Tribulation under the reign of the Antichrist
- 4. Most evangelical commentators believe that the 144,000 is a symbolic representation of all true believers in Christ, Jew and Gentile alike that constitute the church as the Sons and Daughters of Abraham

Galatians 3:26-29 You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

- a. They say the number 144,000 is clearly symbolic, since it is 12 squared times ten cubed... a number connected with the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles... a number of perfection and completion
- b. They also point out the anomalies in the listing of the tribes
 - i) Judah is listed first (probably because Jesus is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, and by him all salvation comes)
 - ii) The tribe of Dan is not listed at all (most commentators say it's because of gross immorality)
 - iii) The Tribe of Ephraim IS mentioned, but so is Joseph... odd... Manasseh was Joseph's son, and the other half-tribe, Ephraim, was not listed... commentators like MacArthur, have to guess at why, though it says that 12,000 were sealed from "EVERY tribe of the sons of Israel"
- c. They say that Jewish imagery is consistently given to the church in the Book of Revelation:

Revelation 1:5-6 To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶ and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father-- to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

[That's directly from Exodus 19 in which Israel is said to be a kingdom of priests:

Exodus 19:5-6 Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶ you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."

- d. They also say that the sealing of these for protection from the winds of wrath that will blow shouldn't be restricted to just Jewish believers

5. We may never fully settle these debates... that's the nature of the Book of Revelation
6. In any case, these folks are SEALED with protection by Almighty God
7. They are in danger on the earth, but they are kept safe by the power of God

2 Peter 2:9 the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment.

The next vision is breathtaking... and I think it is the verse in Revelation I have quoted the most frequently, because of its obvious connection to missions

III. A Multitude from Every Nation Redeemed and Rejoicing (vs. 7:9-12)

Revelation 7:9-10 After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

A. This is the Goal of All Redemptive History

1. Unlike the 144,000, this number is so vast it cannot be counted
2. The redeemed come from every NATION, TRIBE, PEOPLE, and LANGUAGE
3. This is the fulfillment of the original call of Abraham:

Genesis 12:2-3 "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

4. Out of the churning mass of the sea of humanity, God by his gospel calls his elect and they will survive the Great Tribulation of human history
5. This is the sure and certain vision of the success of the Great Commission and the promise of the spread of the gospel

Matthew 24:14 And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

- a. But in Revelation 7:9, he says it will be SUCCESSFUL!!

Revelation 7:9-10 After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing

before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

We'll dig into this much more next time I preach, which will be in six weeks!

IV. The Rewards of the Righteous: Eternal Worship, Protection, Provision (7:13-17)

Revelation 7:13-17 Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes-- who are they, and where did they come from?" ¹⁴ I answered, "Sir, you know." And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵ 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 spread his tent over them. ¹⁶ Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. ¹⁷ For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

V. Applications

A. Come to Christ... there is NO OTHER REFUGE!!

1. Those fleeing the wrath of God in Revelation 6 sought a refuge:

Revelation 6:16-17 They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! ¹⁷ For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

2. The only refuge there is from the wrath of an omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent God is Christ
3. Christ died on the cross to deliver sinners like you and me from the wrath to come
4. All of Revelation 7 has been to answer that question... "Who is able to stand?"
5. Only those who flee to Christ!

B. Christians: Delight in that Refuge!

1. Understand the amazing grace that has sheltered you and will shelter you from the wrath to come
2. Realize that God is holding back the winds of his hurricane that is coming... holding it back from YOU

3. Give thanks to God for your salvation, as the angels do in verses 11-12

***Revelation 7:11-12 They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,
¹² saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and
 power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"***

4. Since we will be spending eternity giving God the glory, let's do it now

C. Be Humbled by the God-Centered Worship of Heaven

1. Your salvation BELONGS TO GOD and TO THE LAMB
2. Stop all your boasting! Let him who boasts boast in the Lord!
3. Stop boasting in your achievements... they are dust in the wind
4. Stop boasting in your money... it will not buy anything of lasting value if not given in service to the Kingdom
5. Stop boasting in your strength or beauty or athletic ability or intelligence... all those attributes are temporary and will fade away
6. Boast in what God has done to save a multitude greater than anyone could count

D. Delight in the Multi-Ethnic Nature of Heaven

1. People from every tribe and language and people and nation!
2. God delights in AMORAL DIVERSITY... so should we!

E. Be Encouraged About the Final End of Missions... Despite the Seemingly Pathetic Failure it Often Appears to Be

F. Commit Yourself to the Great Commission and to Missions

About the Evangelistic Cards you received this morning:

I'd like to ask all of you to pick up the card you received in your bulletin...

You didn't select the card, it came to you by God's providential ordering of things, just like happens in ordinary life

You can leave the card on the pew and do nothing with it... or you can take it home and throw it in the trash and do nothing more with it

Or you can take it seriously and ask the Lord what he wants you to do with it...

It may be that the card doesn't line up with your life at all... for example, one of the ideas I had (indeed, the one that started the whole thing in my mind a few weeks ago) was that of a dog owner taking his or her dog to the little dog park across the street where there is a chain-link fence and a park bench... and using that setting to sit down and talk with another dog owner; get to know that person, and invite them to church—you can even point to it. Now, I myself don't own a dog! But where there's a will, there's a way—I can definitely borrow another church member's dog and go there, saying I'm dogsitting and I don't know the first thing about dogs... that will immediately get me into a conversation with someone!