

**FGBC: Lamb of Thrones: Sealed!**

Revelation 7:1-17

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One of the great things about being a man is that we don't need to heed the advice of the more experienced, we can do it ourselves. At least that's the theory.

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Before we started pastoring here Nikki and I spent 4 years in South Korea where we worked at a university teaching English. We both really enjoyed our time in Asia. It was an amazing opportunity to see a part of the world we otherwise likely wouldn't have. But there was one problem. Every year, at the end of August, we had to take a trip to Japan to renew our work visas.

Now going to Japan was great, the problem was we had to do it by boat. And that would be okay too, except August is Typhoon season in Asia.

Now for anyone who doesn't know Typhoons are the Asian equivalent of North America's hurricanes. So 100km/h+ winds and rain that flies sideways. No big deal. Until you are out on a boat in the middle of the ocean, which is where these storms start.

Now the first couple times we traveled to Japan we managed to squeak through just before or just after one of these storms. And this gave me a great sense of unjustified self-confidence. There were waves, but nothing I couldn't handle. So when, on the third year as we prepared to board, Nikki who had been paying attention to the weather reports recommended we take Gravol, I responded "Men don't need "the promise of powerful assistance for the suppression of nausea, vomiting and dizziness due to motion sickness" we are men.

And on we climbed onto the Beetle – a two story commuter ferry and took off to Japan. Nikki with her promise and me with my self-confidence.

Today I want to ask the question: What is it you need in order to stand strong in your faith in the midst of the troubled waters? God's promises or your confidence?

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Alright, if you are new with us today we are in the middle of a series through the book of Revelation. This is a gift Jesus gave to the church which enabled it to survive in an incredibly antagonistic world.

In 100AD Rome was a religious society in which Christians were ironically viewed as atheists because they refused to worship Jupiter, Juno and the others. And while it was a largely tolerant society it was intolerant if you followed Christ. Those people became lion fodder and got banished to remote islands.

And of course this is where John was when one Sunday afternoon he heard a voice and saw a vision. Jesus opened a window that John was able to look through to see a layer of reality below the layer of reality he saw with his natural eyes.

And this is what is recorded for us in Revelation. Revelation is about drawing back the curtains and giving meaning to suffering while at the same time not taking faith out of the equation. God proves He is in control, but He doesn't tell us when everything He's got planned is going to happen. And God does this because He thinks we don't need to know when, we need to know what: "What do I need in order to stand strong in my faith when I'm in the storms of life?"

So would you stand with me as we read this together? Hear now the word of the Lord:

[Read Revelation 7:1-17]

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Have you ever wondered why every second ad you see online is offering advice? "5 fruits to cut out of your diet that will eliminate stubborn belly fat" – the fat's always stubborn isn't it? Or "10 easy steps to financial freedom in your 20's." The world is full of gurus who promise that with their counsel you have what it takes to thrive in 2020.

And there is nothing wrong with having a positive outlook on yourself and working to improve your situation. But the lie is that by reaching deep inside you can set up an impenetrable wall of good health or financial security that will protect you from life.

Friends, you can't. You don't know if you will get cancer. You don't know if your spouse will die in an accident. You don't know if the company you work for will go bankrupt. And when the unexpected happens every self-help promise is empty.

Do you remember the hopeless prayers of those who refuse to acknowledge God even while they suffer in chapter 6?

The kings of the earth, the rulers, the generals, the wealthy, the powerful, and every slave and free person—all hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains. And they cried to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb. For the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to survive?"  
(Revelation 6:15-17)

That's where self confidence will land you when the unexpected strikes, but there is an alternative. We are invited to live between the two horizons of hope that chapter 7 gives us. Here's the picture:

In verses 1-8 we have the Western horizon where the sun goes down. This is what has come before and already happened. And then in verses 9-17 we get the Eastern horizon where the sun will rise. This is what will happen. And people who live on this plane between these two horizons are those who are able to withstand every unexpected trial and tribulation. Don't you want the confidence to know whether you are going to stand?

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Now the big questions surrounding this chapter are what is this seal and who gets it? And the key verses for understanding this are verses 13 and 14 so we will start there before looking to what has already come and what is yet to come. And our question is "Who can stand?" And the answer is verse 13.

[Read Revelation 7:13-14]

So John is looking out at this multitude that no one can count. People, verse 9 tells us are from every nation, tribe, people and language. And they are holy – God sees them as wearing white. But they aren't this way because they have been good. No, it's because they've washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb.

These are the people who have been sealed. They are the 144,000. They are the multitude from every nation that can't be counted. This chapter tells us that there is one kind of people who are able to stand, they are the Lamb's people.

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Now, if you aren't certain yet there is another piece of the puzzle that is made clear in the end – in Revelation 21 and 22.

There we read about the New Jerusalem, the city where God's people are going to live with Him forever. And it is full of the numbers of this passage. So the walls are 144 cubits thick and the city is 12,000 stadia wide and tall and long. And there are 12 gates each with a name of a tribe of Israel, and 12 foundations each with the name of an Apostle. And it tells us who gets to live there. And here's the key. It says:

[The Lamb's] servants will serve Him. They will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. (Revelation 22:3-4)

So the people in white are the sealed. They've got Jesus' name on their heads. And they are Jews and Gentiles from every corner of earth. That's the first thing we learn about these people.

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The second thing we learn comes from what the angel says in verse 14: "these are they who have come out of the great tribulation."

Now the Greek here is important – I know you don't care about Greek, but it's important here. This verse is not written in the past tense: "They came out of the tribulation." Nor is it future tense "They will come out of some future tribulation." It is in the present continuous tense, happening right now. And the ESV does a great job with bringing this out. It reads:

I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones *coming out of the great tribulation.*" (Revelation 7:14 ESV)

This means the people John saw were coming out of the tribulation in 96AD, and they are still coming out of it today – present continuous. This is why John introduces himself in chapter 1 saying:

I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus. (Revelation 1:9 ESV)

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John saw himself as in the tribulation, and he knows his readers are going to live there too. Now, what is this present continuous tribulation that people in white robes are coming out of?

Again from the Greek – I'm sorry – "great tribulation" is the word "*mega thlipsis*" which means crushing pressure. It's what happens when two tectonic plates collide – that's crushing pressure. But in scripture thlipsis always occurs when two kingdoms collide – the kingdom of God and the kingdom of humanity in rebellion against God.

And when you find yourself on the boarder between these two kingdoms you experience mega thlipsis. And this began with Jesus. When Jesus walked onto the scene He said:

"The time promised by God has come at last!... The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!" (Mark 1:15)

Jesus' message was that with Him God's kingdom was breaking into the world and things were never going to be the same.

And indeed that happened. When Jesus was around sick people got healed, broken lives got restored, dead people got their lives back, and people got back to the relationship with God they were designed to have in the beginning – that's what Jesus was about. Jesus did battle with the kingdom of darkness and made a difference in Palestine. And Jesus followers are still making a difference today.

This is why people who love Jesus get involved with things like Mustard Seed. We believe that PG should be a better city because we are here.

People should be getting healed. Poverty should be diminishing. Relationship should be being restored. And that's because the Spirit of Jesus lives in us and He has put us here. And we stand for that even when it's not easy.

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So the sealed are Jesus-followers from every nation and tribe who are persevering in spite of living in the crushing pressure that happens when the kingdom of God collides with the kingdom of this world.

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Let me ask you: Do you feel that pressure? Are you choosing to live for Christ even though you feel the weight of a disapproving world on your shoulders? Do the standards of morality you accept from Christ not make sense to the world? That's megathlipsis.

So stand strong. God's will is that you persevere through this pressure and come out the other side. And we know this because of the horizon behind and the horizon before.

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So look at verses 1-8. The Jehovah's Witnesses teach that the 144,000 are the full number of those who are saved and the rest of us can never quite be sure. But I've got good news for you, that's not the way numbers work in Revelation. Numbers here are pictures and symbols not math equations.

So we have come across the number 7 already. The seven churches and the seven spirits of God. And the point behind this number is all of it. So the 7 churches represent the entire church and the 7 spirits refer to all of God. 7 is a loaded number in Revelation and in the rest of scripture.

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Remember when Peter asked Jesus "How many times should I forgive my brother who sins against me? 7 times?" That seemed pretty generous to Peter. But Jesus responds "Not 7 times, but 70 x 7." Now Jesus isn't saying "Keep track of how many times you forgive this pathetic piece of meat beside you, and when you hit 490 then lay the smack down." No! His point is forgive the entire amount and then multiply that by 10. Keep forgiving.

10 is another number that means complete in Hebrew tradition. So we get the 10 Commandments – this is the fullness of God's Law. And God brought 10 plagues on Egypt – total devastation.

12 is another number with a picture behind it. 12 is the number of Israel and it is also the number of the church. There are 12 tribes and 12 Apostles.

So when you see a number like 144,000 you should suspect it is going to be loaded with meaning. No Jew would read this literally, it's a symbol. It's  $12 \times 12 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10$ . It's a huge, huge, huge number connected to Israel and the church.

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But isn't it just Israel?... In verse 4 John says they are 144,000 from the tribes of Israel, and then he lays out a neat and tidy list of 12,000 from each tribe. Pretty clear right?

Well, it's clear if you are a 21<sup>st</sup> century Canadian. But any 1<sup>st</sup> century Jew would immediately recognize that this list isn't like any other in the Old Testament.

So first John re-orders the tribes. Judah gets mentioned first when every other list always starts with Reuben – Reuben is the oldest. But John starts with Judah because it is from Judah that the Messiah comes.

And then John leaves a tribe out and adds another. Dan gets left out and Manasseh gets added. Now this isn't a mistake – no Jew would make this mistake. John's making a point – the Messiah changes everything. Israel has changed now that Jesus is here.

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Now as I say this I'm not saying Israel has no place in the story anymore. There is still mystery that they are a part of. But I am saying there isn't a two tier system in heaven where some people get in because they got born in the right family and other people get in because they've been forgiven by the blood of the Lamb. Paul says:

If the Gentiles obey God's law, won't God declare them to be His own people?... For you are not a true Jew just because you were born of Jewish parents or because you have gone through the ceremony of circumcision. No, a true Jew is one whose heart is right with God. And true circumcision is not merely obeying the letter of the law; rather, it is a change of heart produced by the Spirit. (Romans 2:26-29)

And God's goal has always been to make a people for Himself from all humanity. So way back in Genesis 12 where God promised He was going to make Abraham into a great and special nation He said:

"I will make you into a great nation,  
and I will bless you...  
and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you." (Genesis 12:2-3)

So Israel was called and chosen, but not for their sake alone. They were chosen for the sake of everyone. Salvation wasn't just for them, it was going to come through them to all of us. And now that the Messiah had come that was being worked out.

So 144,000 is a highly symbolic number. It represents the complete number of God's people which are now made up of both Jews and Gentiles.

And this is the horizon that lies behind us. Everyone who is saved and sealed has this story. If you are saved it is not because you are awesome or got born into the right family, but because God chose you in spite of yourself and put His name on you. You are His because of Him, not because you deserve to be His.

And this is the Bible's message – salvation is by undeserved grace. And when the Jesus followers in 96AD heard this it empowered them to stand firm no matter what they faced, and this promise has the power to do the same for you.

Friend, you aren't going to persevere by being smart enough or good enough. You will join those coming out of the mega thlipsis because of what Jesus has done on your behalf.

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Just a quick word about the horizon before us – verses 9-17. This is a picture of what is in store for those who are sealed.

So one day we will stand before God's throne and there will be no more hunger or thirst or pain of any kind. We will be with the Lamb. That's what's coming. And it's going to be awesome! So whatever waves you are in the middle of stand firm. You will get there because God has promised it, not because you have earned it.

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10 years ago Nikki chose the promise of Graval, I chose confidence in my own ability. And then the storm hit. And we did not weather the storm the same. While 3 storey waves towered above the two-story Beetle I joined the other 150 passengers lying on the floor and fighting for the bathroom because the ship ran out of barf bags, and Nikki sat in her seat and watched the glory of the storm around her.

Friends, Jesus followers live between two horizons and it's bumpy here. Jesus never promises we get to escape the storms of life – remember the saints from last week's 5<sup>th</sup> seal – “just hang on while a whole bunch more of you get killed.” But He does promise that He will empower us to stand.

So stand. Don't throw in the towel on your faith when the crushing pressure intensifies. And don't look for other things to get you through. Trust in the promises of God that lie behind you and before you: Jesus has bought your salvation, and one day you will be with Him. Let these promises empower you to come through the storm.