

TO JEW AND GENTILE

by Ray C. Stedman

Everyone knows that the tiny nation of Israel, with a population of less than four million people, nevertheless receives enormous attention in the world's media, far beyond what its size would warrant. The only explanation for that extraordinary fact is that it indicates the central place that Israel has in the program of God. God will not let the world forget Israel!

In the Old Testament, of course, Israel is always center stage. Everything centers around this nation. God has recorded the history of the world only as it relates to Israel, the nation that came from the loins of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Even when you come to the Gospels in the New Testament, Israel is still the focus of attention. Jesus insisted that "salvation is of the Jews," {John 4:22 KJV}. He corrected people when they misunderstood that principle. He sent his twelve disciples out and told them, "Go not to the Gentiles, but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," {Matt 10:6, 15:24 KJV}. Even in the epistles of the New Testament, primarily written to the church, nevertheless the Apostle Paul in his great masterpiece, the letter to the Romans, devotes three chapters to Israel. He points out in Chapter 9 how God has dealt with them in the past, in Chapter 10 he states the present condition of Israel, existing in unbelief among the nations of the world, and in Chapter 11 he clearly foretells the time when God will restore Israel again to prominence among the nations of earth. God has a great future yet for the Israelis.

I find it very strange that many commentators on the book of Revelation and other passages of Scripture virtually ignore this remarkable future that God has predicted for his ancient people. Although God has saved these commentators by sheer grace, yet they refuse to believe that he will yet show equal grace to Israel. But God declares plainly that is what he intends to do. How he will do it is made known in Revelation 7. That is where we have come today.

The next prophetic event that the world will experience is the rapture of the church, the departure of dead and living saints, all born-again people, to be with the Lord. It is described in detail by the Apostle Paul in First Thessalonians 4. It is a stunning event wherein God suddenly removes from the earth a great host of people. You can imagine what an effect that will have on those left. That is how the long-predicted "last days" starts. After that, God begins a program of judgment in which Israel is at the center.

During our study of Revelation 6 last week, we were all glued to our chairs as we watched the unrolling of the seven-sealed scroll held in the hands of "the Lamb who had been slain," {cf, Rev 5:6, 6:1-17}. We saw the four terrible horsemen ride out through the earth, leaving devastation and terror in their wake. Then we were shown the slaughter of thousands of martyrs who lost their lives in a great bloodbath during this terrible time of judgment to come. Finally, we read the description of the great upheaval in nature that will take place in the last days, when every mountain and rock is moved and shaken, and the people of the earth cry out, "Fall on us and hide us from the wrath of Him who sits upon the throne," {Rev 6:16a NIV}

To many who read that, it seems like an unwelcome pronouncement of doom and gloom, but we must remember that, all through the Bible, it is part of God's announced program for the end times. It leads beyond the darkness and despair to a time of great peace, victory, and blessing upon the earth. Christians are not pessimists -- they are optimists -- but they recognize the reality of a time of judgment to come.

We have now seen six of the seven seals opened, but before the seventh seal is opened God, as it were, declares an intermission. We are ready for it after the judgments of Chapter 6, are we not? It is hard to listen to those terrible scenes. But in a beautiful interlude here in Chapter 7, which is in the nature of a flashback, God shows us something else that takes place during this period of time.

Sometimes a movie will flashback to the central character's childhood and depict an event that has significance for the film story. That is the kind of thing we have in Chapter 7.

We are taken back to the beginning of the judgments of this last seven-year period to see another aspect of God's working during this time. What we will see is the selection of a special group of Jews whom I would call "Christ's Commandos," to operate in an uncommon way during those days.

This is introduced to us in Verses 1-3: John says,

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. Then I saw another angel coming up from the east [literally, "the sun rising"], 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: "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." {Rev 7:1-3 NIV}

We are told in the opening chapter of Revelation that much of it will be made known to us by symbols. The book is an unusual blending of literal and symbolic things and events. There are certain symbols here in the opening of this chapter.

The "four corners of the earth," for instance, stand for the four cardinal directions. Skeptics laugh at the phrase "four corners" and say the early Christians believed the earth was square and literally had four corners. Yet today people frequently use the expression "the four corners of the earth" as a figure of speech to indicate far-off regions. But here it means the four directions, north, south, east and west.

Here four angels are seen withholding something that is about to come upon the whole earth. What is it that they are restraining? They are told to hold back the four winds that are about to blow upon the earth. Winds are a symbol of devastating and destroying power. The TV pictures of the terrible devastation left behind by Hurricane Hugo when it blew across the southern states of the East Coast recently leave us in no doubt how apt it is to use wind as a symbol of judgment. The same destructive power is seen in one of these whirling dervishes, called tornadoes. Here, then, is a picture of terrible judgment that is about to fall on the earth, a devastating power or force that is to be released soon.

The land, the sea, and the trees are also used as symbols here. The land or the earth, is used frequently as a symbol for Israel throughout the Old Testament. Israel is viewed as a nation with stability because it had God as its head. It had structure, order, and foundation, and so it was depicted as "land." But the sea is used many places in Scripture to describe the Gentile nations (pagan nations, by and large), which had no inner stability because there was no recognition of the authority of God. They worshipped idols and held to pagan concepts which rendered them unstable and uncertain in their conduct of human affairs. Individuals are described in several places in Scripture as "trees." The very first Psalm, speaking of the righteous, says, "He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of waters, that brings forth its fruit in its season," {cf, Psa 1:3a KJV}. Trees are symbols of influential men and women, people of authority, who stand out from the crowd like tall trees in a forest.

These four angels are identifiable as the first four of the seven angels that will blow their trumpets in succeeding chapters. If one carefully compares what happens under the judgments of the seven angels you will see that the first four affect the land, the sea and the trees. At this point they are told to hold back until a very important group of individuals are sealed by God.

The great angel that seals them is linked here with the rising of the sun. That is an allusion to the prophecy of Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament. The prophet predicts that "the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in his wings," {Mal 4:2}. That is a poetic description of the coming of Christ in great glory and power. So, it is in relationship to that coming that this special group are marked with the seal of God's ownership.

We do not have to guess at what the seal of God is, because believers today are also sealed by God. Paul tells us in the letter to the Ephesians, "You were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise," {cf, Eph 4:30}. The presence of the Spirit of God in every individual Christian is the unmistakable mark of God's ownership. Paul

declares in Chapter 8 of Romans, "His Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God," {cf, Rom 8:16 KJV}. The Holy Spirit himself, then, is the seal of God.

This indicates that this group which is to be sealed are Spirit-filled individuals. The seal is placed upon their forehead which indicates the Spirit is especially related to their minds. It means that in some evident sense they are governed by "the mind of Christ." In Chapter 2 of Philippians the Apostle Paul writes, "Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus," {cf, Phil 2:5 KJV}. He describes it as the mind of one who, though possessing inherent glory and dignity, is willing to lay it aside and become a servant. That is the mind of Christ. Notice that these people are specifically called the "servants of our God." They serve with that same wonderful willingness to give up themselves for the sake and benefit of others.

We are told exactly who these are in Verses 4-8:

**Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.
From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed,
from the tribe of Reuben 12,000,
from the tribe of Gad 12,000,
from the tribe of Asher 12,000,
from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000,
from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000,
from the tribe of Simeon 12,000,
from the tribe of Levi 12,000,
from the tribe of Issachar 12,000,
from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000,
from the tribe of Joseph 12,000,
from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000. {Rev 7:4-8 NIV}**

I have deliberately read the names of each of the tribes because I want to emphasize what the text emphasizes: It is Israel and only Israel that is in view!

I recently listened to a commentator on Revelation, teaching on the radio here in the Bay Area, who labored with diligent effort to prove that these people were the church, but when God says Israel he means Israel; he does not mean the church. He is talking about Jews. Teachers who twist Scripture like that man did can convince others that black is white, sugar is sour, and Adolph Hitler was one of the great saints of all time! There is much such twisting of Scripture going on, but if one stays with the simplicity of the Scripture itself, all is clear.

These are, then, the well-known 144,000 Jews of the last days.

In their earlier days, the group known as Jehovah's Witnesses claimed they constituted this select band. They misappropriated this Scripture and applied it to themselves, though they are not Jews and never were. They ran into difficulty, however, when the group grew beyond 144,000. They did not know what to do with the leftovers, so they started another category of 144,000. They taught there was an earthly band of 144,000 and a heavenly band, and if you believed their doctrines in the early decades of this century you could belong to the heavenly band. But now, again, they have a problem because they number more than 288,000 today, so they have created still a third band called "the servant band." If you join the Jehovah's Witnesses today you must come in at the servant level. That is just one example of the many ways people can twist Scripture to make it fit a program of their own devising. But God clearly identifies these people for us here.

You may have noticed that two of the tribes of Israel, that of Ephraim and of Dan, are not mentioned here. Though Ephraim is not named, his brother-tribe, Manasseh is included. Ephraim and Manasseh were the two sons of Joseph, the next to the youngest of Jacob's sons. Because of Joseph's role in the history of Israel, and his preservation of the nation in Egypt during the days of famine, his two sons were adopted by Jacob to be given an inheritance with the rest of Joseph's brothers. That really makes thirteen tribes of Israel. When they came to divide up the land Levi was left out because he was called to be the priestly tribe. Ephraim actually does appear here under the name "Joseph." So Manasseh and Joseph are really Manasseh and Ephraim.

But what about Dan? The tribe of Dan is not included here, I believe, because they are the tribe that introduced apostasy into Israel. The closing chapters of Judges give an account of the sordid way the tribe of Dan led Israel into terrible apostasy, involving homosexuality and idol worship in its grossest forms. This was in line with Jacob's prediction concerning Dan. In the 49th chapter of Genesis Jacob predicts the future of his twelve sons and he says, "Dan will be a serpent by the roadside, a viper along the path, that bites the horse's heel so that its rider tumbles backward," {Gen 49:17 NIV}. It is a poetic portrayal of the treachery of Dan in introducing apostasy. In the millennium, however, Ezekiel tells us that Dan has a portion in the distribution of the land in that day.

There is a statement of Jesus in the 24th chapter of Matthew, which relates to these 144,000 Jews, and is often misunderstood and misapplied, in my judgment. In unfolding the events of the future, Jesus had said, "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached to the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come," {cf, Matt 24:14 NIV}. The gospel is always the same in every age. It is the story of God sending a Savior to die for the sins of men. Whether it is told by means of symbol, such as the sacrifice of animals, or by the ritual of the tabernacle, or whether it is the historic announcement of the Lord himself and the disciples in the early days of the church, the gospel is always the same. It is the death of a Savior on behalf of sinners. That is the good news. There is no other.

But when one adds the phrase "of the kingdom," then it is a reference to that gospel applied in a specific relationship. John the Baptist and Jesus both preached "the gospel of the kingdom" to Israel. They announced that the messianic kingdom, long predicted by the prophets, was at hand because the King was in their midst. Jesus announces that he is a King, not the kind the Jews expected -- a conqueror who would deliver them from the Romans -- but that his kingdom would deal with sin and the terrible evil of man. It must begin on that note. But he was their long-expected King. He deliberately fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah, "Behold, your king comes unto you, meek and lowly and riding upon an ass and upon a colt, the foal of an ass," {cf, Zech 9:9 KJV}. That was fulfilled on the day we call "the triumphal entry," when Jesus rode a donkey down the side of the Mount of Olives and was greeted by the people as the promised King of the Jews.

This group of 144,000 select men from Israel, will fulfill the word of Jesus that this "gospel of the kingdom" will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the final judgments of God will come. This group proclaims the gospel during that seven-year period that we call "the last days" of this age. It is a band of Spirit-filled Jews, converted after the church has been taken out of the world. Like 144,000 Apostle Paul's, they preach the gospel throughout the earth during the judgments of the end times.

There is a most extraordinary passage in the 10th chapter of Matthew which confirms this concept. It describes the Lord sending out his disciples to preach the gospel to Israel in the days of his flesh.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions, "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give." {Matt 10:5-8 NIV}

Then Jesus goes on to give further instructions in that ministry of the twelve, and warns them that they will not be welcome in every place. But when we come to Verse 21 he apparently skips over the centuries to these last days when the gospel will be preached to Israel again:

"Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes." {Matt 10:21-23 NIV}

There is no record of Jesus coming to the twelve when he sent them out to minister to Israel. Rather they came back to him and reported on what they had been doing. Our Lord seems to leap over the whole of the present age to the day when a group of Jews (not twelve but twelve squared, times the cube of ten -- 144,000), will be sent out into all the world. He says to them, "You will not even have finished preaching through all of Israel

until the Son of Man comes." It seems to be clearly his prediction of this ministry of the 144,000. We will meet them again in Revelation 14, ministering under the direction of the Lamb himself, but on earth, and beginning with Israel. What is the result of their preaching? We are told in Revelation 7:9-14:

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. And they cried out in a loud voice:

"Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying:

"Amen!

**Praise and glory
and wisdom and thanks and honor
and power and strength
be to our God for ever and ever.
Amen!"**

Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes -- who are they, and where did they come from?"

I answered, "Sir, you know," [By now John has learned that these elders are party to the mind of God; they know what God is planning.] 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." {Rev 7:9-14 NIV}

Because John is in heaven he sees these things from an eternal point of view, and, as we have seen before, there is no sequence or time limitations, no past or future in heaven. From our standpoint of time, John sees things that are happening at the close of the seven-year week. He sees ahead, as it were, to the end of the seven years, and sees this great multitude that have come out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb, and they have palm branches in their hands.

When did we last find a crowd of people with palm branches in their hands, welcoming Jesus as a King? It was, of course, when he rode down the mountainside into Jerusalem. The prophet is linking that event with this. Then, Israel had the opportunity to receive their King, but the leaders of the nation rejected him. At this event, in the end times, they are welcoming and worshipping their King, still with palm branches in their hands. So this great multitude of Jews and Gentiles is particularly associated with the restoration of Israel.

These are all martyrs. They have died for the sake of Christ during the tribulation, and they now appear before the throne of God as victors over death and hell, and join the worship of angels around the throne.

Is it not wonderful to think that, in earth's darkest hour, yet to come, the greatest harvest the world has ever seen will take place? Millions of those who have never heard the gospel today will be saved. I do not think there is any possibility that those today who hear and reject the gospel will be any part of this number. It is a harvest of those who have never heard.

During these terrible days of judgment, when the witches of war ride their nuclear brooms across the darkening skies of the world's last night, thousands who have never heard before will hear the gospel of the coming kingdom of God announced, and will turn to Christ. It will cost them their lives. As we read on in Revelation we will see that the anti-Christian powers of that day, powerful and tyrannical, will massacre anyone who does not bear "the mark of the beast." These believers must give up their lives because of their testimony for God. We will meet them again when we come to Chapter 20. There we are told that those "who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God" {Rev 20:1 NIV} will be raised from the dead to serve the Lord throughout the thousand-year reign of Christ. It is the same multitude

as here. John sees them in heaven at this point, but they are given a spiritual ministry on earth during the thousand-year reign of Christ.

That is suggested in the closing description of their ministry, beginning with Verse 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.
Never again will they hunger;
never again will they thirst.
The sun will not beat upon them,
nor any scorching heat.
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." {Rev 7:15-17 NIV}**

Notice the throne and the temple. In fact, there are two thrones in this passage. There is, first, the "throne of God," which is the throne of the Father, reigning over all the universe, as we have seen throughout this book thus far. But the second mention of the throne, "He who sits on the throne," is a reference to the throne of Jesus on earth. Remember that in 3:21, in the letter to the Laodicean church, Jesus said, "He who overcomes I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne." This is "the throne of his father, David," which was promised in the annunciation to Mary, recorded in Luke 1:32.

The fact that a temple is mentioned here, is, I believe, a reference to the millennial temple which is yet to be built in Jerusalem; the one which Ezekiel describes in the closing chapters of his great prophecy. It will be the place where the nations come to worship in the days when Christ rules over the earth. There is a beautiful description of it in the prophecy of Micah 4:1-6: There the prophet describes the government of God as centered in Jerusalem; justice will flow out from there to all the earth; the nations will bring their tribute; and men shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks and will make war no more. Peace will come at last over all the earth.

Here we are told that "they serve the Lord day and night." There is no day or night in heaven. This is clearly an earthly scene. He who sits on the throne (the throne of David), will spread his "tabernacle" (literally), over them and never again will they hunger or thirst, etc. It is a beautiful description of the blessings of that millennial day. Many other passages in the prophets also describe it.

This is the fulfillment of the dream of the prophets of the past. Israel shall blossom as the rose and shall fill the earth with blessing. The nation will be like a beautiful, fruitful, vine that runs its branches throughout the earth and blesses the nations, just as Abraham had been promised, "All nations shall be blessed because of you," {cf, Gen 22:18}. Associated with them will be thousands of Gentiles who likewise serve the Lord day and night in relationship to the temple, ministering throughout the whole earth. You can read of that in the prophecy of Isaiah, Chapter 66, Verses 20-21.

All alike, Jews and Gentiles, are under the care of the Great Shepherd of the sheep. Christians are grateful for the shepherd care of Jesus to us now. He is the Great Shepherd of the sheep, but he has more than one flock. On one occasion he said to his disciples, "Other sheep have I that are not of this fold. Them also must I bring that there will be one flock and one Shepherd," {cf, John 10:16 KJV}. That is what we see here. He is bringing another group, saved by his blood -- "they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" -- but with an earthly ministry, yet he leads them also to refreshment and blessing, with every tear of sorrow wiped away.

There is a great hymn we often sing, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," that reflects the concern of the church for her sister people Israel. Paul's word of promise about Israel will be fulfilled, "All Israel shall be saved" {Rom 11:26 NIV}, i.e., all the generation that are on earth when Jesus returns shall be redeemed. Zechariah gives us a vivid picture of it. The church today ought to know this truth and understand the future God has for

his people Israel. We should often sing,

O come, O come, Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here,
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel!

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