

Lesson 18

Last week we started Chapter 7, which is an interlude between the sixth seal and the seventh seal.

Chapter 7 is here to provide comfort to the church and to reassure the church that they will be victorious over Rome if they remain faithful unto death.

Last week we looked at the 144,000 who were sealed in verse 4, and we discussed who they were and what it meant for them to be sealed.

When we ended we were looking at the twelve tribes in verses 4-8, and we discussed how the 12 names of those tribes reinforces the central theme of this book: Caesar or Christ?

Verse 9 will show us a great multitude dressed in white robes and standing before the throne of God and before the Lamb.

Revelation 7:9-12

9 After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; 10 And cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb. 11 And all the angels stood round about the throne, and about the elders and the four beasts, and fell before the throne on their faces, and worshipped God, 12 Saying, Amen: Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen.

Verses 9-12 are modeled after the Jewish Feast of the Tabernacles (called the feast of booths in the KJV). We can read about that feast in Leviticus.

Leviticus 23:39-43 — Also in the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when ye have gathered in the fruit of the land, ye shall keep a feast unto the Lord seven days: on the first day shall be a sabbath, and on the eighth day shall be a sabbath. And ye shall take you on the first day the boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and ye shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days. And ye shall keep it a feast unto the Lord seven days in the year. It shall be a statute for ever in your generations: ye shall celebrate it in the seventh month. Ye shall dwell in booths seven days; all that are Israelites born shall dwell in booths: That your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

We can immediately see some similarities between that feast from Leviticus 23 and what we see here in verses 9-12 — the rejoicing, the palm trees, the number seven, and the celebration of a great deliverance.

In John 7:37 the Feast of the Tabernacles is referred to simply as “**the** feast.” The Rabbis said that “he who has not seen Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles does not know what rejoicing means.”

The Feast of Tabernacles commemorated the exodus from Egypt when the Israelites dwelt in tents and tabernacles. The people would build booths or tabernacles with walls made of branches and thatched roofs and then live in them for seven days as a way of remembering that great deliverance by God.

One of the most important rituals during this feast was the pouring of water in the temple. A specially appointed priest was sent to the Pool of Siloam with a golden pitcher to bring water from the pool. This water was then poured by the High Priest into a basin at the foot of the altar amidst the blasting of trumpets and the singing of the Hallel (Psalm 113-118).

It was at the end of such a celebration that Jesus told the people that he was the real source of living water.

John 7:37-38 — In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.

The original feast from Leviticus 23 looked **forward** to the Messiah. Those at this great celebration in Revelation 7 are shown as **figuratively** looking at the Messiah, just as those celebrating the feast in John 7 were **literally** looking at the Messiah.

And this celebration is not limited to the Jews. Instead, we see in verse 9 a great multitude “of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues.” As before, that is a reminder that the eternal kingdom is open to all who will obey the gospel. There are no national or racial boundaries in the church.

Is there anywhere else in the Bible where the Feast of Tabernacles is figuratively applied to the church? Yes, and that’s a review question because we saw this same feast in our study of Zechariah 14 (and those lessons are available at www.ThyWordIsTruth.com).

Zechariah 14:16 — And it shall come to pass, that every one that is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall even go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the feast of tabernacles.

As we recall from that earlier study, the “nations” that came against Jerusalem is Rome, which came against spiritual Jerusalem, the church. That Rome is called “nations” rather than “nation” simply reflects the historical reality — Rome was an amalgam of all the nations it had conquered. When Rome came against you it was as if all the nations of the world had come against you. That verse from Zechariah 14 was a prophecy of the very persecution by Rome that we are seeing here in Revelation.

Zechariah 14:16 is directed to those in the Roman empire who did **not** experience the terrible judgments of the previous verses in Zechariah 14 (judgments prophesied by Zechariah and by John). **Who are those Romans?** There can be only one answer to that question — they are the Romans who came through that judgment because they switched sides! They are those Romans who heard and obeyed the gospel. They are the Romans who chose Christ over Caesar!

How do we know that? Zechariah 14:16 tells us that — it says that they “shall even go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the feast of tabernacles.” They are worshiping God, and not just once, but regularly! These Romans are the Romans who saw the errors of their ways and obeyed the gospel. We know there were such people from the many examples we see in the New Testament. Some of them were very close to Caesar himself.

Philippians 4:22 — All the saints salute you, chiefly they that are of Caesar’s household.

We see the same thing here in verse 9 — this group of worshippers includes those “of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues.” All nations includes Rome!

Yes, some of the Christians proved to be faithless and fell away. We saw examples of that in Revelation 2-3. But some of the Romans proved faithful and fell away from Rome! Some of the Romans became followers of Christ rather than followers of Caesar!

What we see here is a wonderful testimony about the early church. In the midst of the most terrible persecution, the church continued its mission of evangelizing the world! Rome was not able to derail the church from its great mission. The church was proclaiming the gospel to those who sought to kill them. And how many were converted by the example of those early Christians who were willing to face death and terrible hardships for Christ? The early church is an example to the modern church — and particularly the modern church that is not having to facing great persecution or terrible hardship for the sake of Christ.

But why are the Christians in verses 9-12 keeping the Jewish feast of the tabernacles? Does that mean that the entire old covenant law will be brought back into force in the end times as the premillennialists teach? **Of course not.** **How could anyone believe such a thing?** We know that the old law cannot be in force with Jesus as our King and High Priest (Hebrews 7:12). And we know that the old law was nailed to the cross (Colossians 2:14) and has been replaced with the new law of Christ (Hebrews 8:13; Galatians 6:2). What need do we have for the old law now that Christ has come?

So what is meant in Zechariah 14 and here in Revelation 7? The language used is highly figurative, so we need to ask what is meant by the **symbol** of the feast of the tabernacles. **Why would the converted Romans be shown keeping that particular feast?** At least three reasons.

First, the feast we intended to remember and celebrate the deliverance of God's people from terrible bondage.

Second, on the first day of the feast 13 bulls were offered, 12 on the next day, 11 on the third, and so on until 7 were offered on the seventh day — making a total of 70 offerings. The rabbis taught that the number 70 depicted the number of nations in the world, which meant that this feast looked forward to a time when both Jew and Gentile would worship God together.

Third, the pouring of water that we described a moment ago looked forward toward the outpouring of God's spirit upon all nations as mentioned in Joel 2:28 (I will pour out my spirit on all flesh) and which Peter in Acts 2 says was fulfilled during the first century.

So what then does this particular feast figuratively depict? It depicts the escape from bondage, the union of Jew and Gentile, and the outpouring of God's spirit upon the first century church. **Each of those is shown in the conversion to Christ of a Roman citizen.** They have escaped bondage and death, they have joined with Jewish believers in the church, and they are now enjoying the wonderful blessings provided to those in the church.

Zechariah 14:16 tells us that some Romans would be converted, would escape the judgment of Rome, and would enjoy the blessings of those in the church. I think Revelation 7:9-12 is showing us the same thing, and I think the next few verses will confirm that for us.

Revelation 7:13-17

13 And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they? 14 And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 15 Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sit-

teth on the throne shall dwell among them. 16 They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. 17 For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.

In verse 13, one of the elders asks the same question that we just asked: “**Who are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they?**” He then answers his own question and tells John that they are those “which came out of great tribulation.” They “have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” — and that is why they are before the throne of God. That is why they are rejoicing.

What is the “**great tribulation**” in verse 14? That is certainly a key question here, and many would say that it is a key question for the entirety of the book. But most commentaries answer that question without really thinking about it — but let’s not make that mistake!

Let’s first determine what the great tribulation is **not**. There are some **big misconceptions** about the great tribulation.

First, it is a misconception to believe that there is **only one** great tribulation in the Bible. God’s enemies always undergo a great tribulation at one time or another, and the Bible is filled with enemies of God and filled with great tribulations experienced by those enemies of God. As examples, we could list Sodom, Gomorrah, Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Tyre, Media, Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Greece, Damascus, Ethiopia, Phoenicia, Arabia, and sometimes even Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem.

In fact, Jerusalem underwent a great tribulation in AD 70 when it was judged by God using Roman hands. Was that event really a “great tribulation”? Yes — just listen to how Jesus described it.

***Matthew 24:21** — For then shall be **great tribulation**, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be.*

That great tribulation was fulfilled in AD 70 with the destruction of Jerusalem. Some people read Matthew 24:21 and conclude that it must be speaking about the end of the world. After all, it says that there has never been and will never be another tribulation like that one. But we know that Matthew 24:21 was **not** talking about the end of the world. Why? Because of Matthew 24:34 — “This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.” Whatever Matthew 24:21 was talking about, it happened in the first century. (And we know from the context that it was talking about the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, which had already happened by the time Revelation 7 was written.)

The language in Matthew 24 is apocalyptic, and so we should expect to see vivid, frightening images — and that is exactly what we find in verse 21 of Matthew 24. We have already seen similar vivid hyperbolic language from the Old Testament, where it was also **not** describing the end of the world.

Yes, **another** great tribulation will happen on the last day when the ungodly are judged and the world is destroyed. Paul tells us about it.

***Romans 2:5-10** — But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God; Who will render to every man according to his deeds: To them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life: But unto them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath, Tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile; But glory, honour, and peace, to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile.*

That last day will certainly be a great tribulation for those who have rejected the gospel, but that is **not** the great tribulation in Matthew 24:21, and I don't think it is the great tribulation we see here in Revelation 7:14.

Let's attack this question from another angle. If you had started reading the Bible in Genesis and if you had now read all the way to Revelation, wouldn't you **expect** there to be a great tribulation in Rome's future? Hasn't that always been God's way of dealing with the enemies of his people? How many times

would you have seen that process repeated between the book of Genesis and this book of Revelation?

Chapter 6 told us that a great tribulation was coming for Rome. The saints were sealed earlier in Chapter 7 in anticipation of that great tribulation. So, Chapter 7 has already told us the church was about to go through a great tribulation. Now we see the church after it has come out of the great tribulation! Isn't that exactly what we would expect to see? Isn't that exactly what verse 14 tells us? "These are they which came out of great tribulation."

Most of the descriptions of what God has in store for Rome appear in later chapters in this book, but the outcome for the church is so certain that God is showing it to us here in Chapter 7 — and God will show it to us again at the end of the book. **It is as if God did not want the first century readers to worry one bit about the outcome as they read or listened to this book.** God tells them right from the start that they will be victorious if their robes remain white. That fact is never in doubt.

Here is the image that God is painting: Rome is persecuting the church. The church cries out for vindication. God says that Rome will experience his wrath. The church is sealed by God before the tribulation of Rome. After the tribulation of Rome, the church is shown rejoicing in heaven. Later we will see the church figuratively returned to a world made new by God's judgment and removal of Rome.

Was the church also affected by this great tribulation? Yes and no. Yes, they were **physically** affected because they were in it. They were living in Rome. But no they were not **spiritually** affected because they came out of it (verse 14), which means they spiritually escaped. Their robes were white, and that great tribulation was not a judgment against them.

Does the **past tense** ("which came out") in verse 14 mean that this judgment had already happened by the time the book was written? No. What it means is that the outcome of God's battle with Rome was never in doubt. The outcome was so certain that God spoke of it in past tense before it even happened. We see that so frequently in the Bible that it has a name — the prophetic past tense.

Was the church literally in heaven at this time? No, not all of them, although those who had died in Christ were literally there. We have already seen the martyrs shown under the altar. So why are they all shown in heaven here? Doesn't that mean the world has ended? No.

God depicts the Christians in this book as already being in heaven even while they still lived on earth. As for the ungodly Romans, this book consistently refers to them as “those that dwell upon the earth.” Later, when the Romans are cleared out of the way, we will figuratively see the church return to an earth made new (Revelation 21:2).

What Revelation 21:2 tells us is that even if we were to take all of this literally, we could still not say that the earth had been destroyed prior to Chapter 7. But, of course, this is not literal; it is all figurative. In reality the church never left the earth in the first century. The departure of the church will not occur in reality until the last great day (1 Corinthians 15:24). God’s shows the church in heaven to show that they are secure and safe in God’s hands. The church does not need to take care of Rome; God will do that. All the church needs to do is watch and cheer and remain faithful while God answers their prayers for vindication.

Who are “those before the throne” in verse 15? Those before the throne are the 144,000 (*all* of God’s people) looked at from a different perspective. They are the people who were marked looked at from a different perspective.

This group before the throne is the **church**. Who else can stand before the throne of God? Who else serves God as priests? With whom else does God dwell? Who else does God shelter? Who else has the Lamb in their midst? Who else can celebrate this great deliverance?

If you ever find yourself taking a multiple choice test on the book of Revelation — I suspect you will make a pretty good grade if you just choose the church as the answer each time it is an option! **God wants us to see the church as He sees the church, and so God is showing us over and over and in many different ways how He sees the church!**

Many things in Revelation are symbolized by different symbols at different points in the book. Jesus is seen as a Lion, as a Lamb, and as a rider on a white horse. Rome is seen as a beast from the earth, as a beast from the sea, and as a blood thirsty harlot. Remember that dissimilarity of speech does not imply distinctness of subjects. Different images can be used to depict the same object.

But how do we know that this group and the 144,000 are the same? Just read their descriptions, both here and later in Chapter 14. The 144,000 were sealed to preserve them through the great tribulation, and this group consists of those who came out of the great tribulation. Both groups are before the throne

(7:15 and 14:3). Both groups are led by the Lamb and redeemed from the earth (7:17 and 14:3). The symbol 144,000 is used to denote all of God's people with not one left out, and here we see "a great multitude, which no man could number."

This group is the church. But the real question for us is not **who is this group** but rather is **when is this group**. Is this group the church at the end of **Rome**, or is this group the church at the end of **time**? Most commentaries would say the end of time, but we already know that most commentaries are completely wrong about this book — so we should definitely not proceed by headcount!

We do see some symbols here in these verses that we very commonly apply to our future home in heaven — no hunger (verse 16), no thirst (verse 16), and no tears (verse 17). And yet, once again we see symbols here that are used elsewhere in the Bible to refer, not to the end of the world, but to the state of God's people under his care and under his protection while still on this earth. **Yes, we will experience these blessings once we arrive in heaven, but we can also spiritually experience those blessings here on earth.**

Think about **Psalm 23**, for example. We generally do not think of that Psalm as something reserved for only the future, and yet what do we find there?

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

No hunger? No thirst? The picture in Psalm 23 is that of a well cared for flock.

Psalm 121:5-6 — The Lord is thy keeper: the Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand. The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.

Doesn't that look like what we see here in Revelation 7:16? "Neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat."

If Psalm 23 and Psalm 121 are not describing the end of the world, then why must Revelation 7 be describing the end of the world?

But are we really saying that a child of God today in the church can experience a life without hunger, thirst, and tears? **Yes**. Certainly not physically, but spiritually. Yes, we will cry physical tears (as Jesus himself did), but spiritually we will have no tears. **Those spiritual blessings are not just blessings for God's people at some future time; they are blessings for God's people here and now.**

What did Isaiah prophecy?

Isaiah 49:8-10 — *Thus saith the Lord, In an acceptable time have I heard thee, and in a day of salvation have I helped thee: and I will preserve thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, to establish the earth, to cause to inherit the desolate heritages; That thou mayest say to the prisoners, Go forth; to them that are in darkness, Shew yourselves. They shall feed in the ways, and their pastures shall be in all high places. **They shall not hunger nor thirst; neither shall the heat nor sun smite them:** for he that hath mercy on them shall lead them, even by the springs of water shall he guide them.*

That sounds a lot like Revelation 7:16, doesn't it? In fact, it is almost a word for word quote. When was that promise from Isaiah 49 fulfilled? Paul tells us.

2 Corinthians 6:1-2 — *We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain. (For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.)*

What Paul is telling us there is that the prophecy from Isaiah 49 (which he quotes) was pointing to the salvation that came through Jesus Christ. **Now is the day!**

John 6:35 — *I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.*

Did Jesus' followers in the first century literally cease to feel physical hunger and thirst. Of course not! And I think we all know that the promise here is not a physical one — even if we took it to be the end of the world, it would not be a physical promise. This promise is a spiritual promise.

Remember the context here. Remember the setting. This is modeled after the Feast of the Tabernacles. And what did Jesus say after that great feast?

John 7:37-38 — *If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.*

Was that promise physical or spiritual? Was that promise for the here and now or just for the end of the world? We know that it was a spiritual promise for the here and now.

Does the Bible use these same symbols elsewhere for events that are **not** the end of the world? Absolutely.

Listen to what God's people were told by Isaiah when they were being persecuted by Assyria.

Isaiah 25:8 — He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the Lord hath spoken it.

*Isaiah 30:19 — For the people shall dwell in Zion at Jerusalem: **thou shalt weep no more**: he will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when he shall hear it, he will answer thee.*

God's people were weeping because of persecution, and they cried out for deliverance. God promised them deliverance and told them he would wipe away those tears. It happened in the Old Testament with regard to Assyria. It is happening here with regard to Rome.

The verse we just read from Isaiah 25:8 is particularly interesting. We know it applied initially to Assyria. Why? Because of the surrounding verses, and especially Isaiah 25:7. **But we also know that Isaiah 25:8 had a dual fulfillment.** How? Because Paul quotes the same verse in 1 Corinthians 15:54 and applies it to the end of time.

We **may** have some dual fulfillments in Revelation just as we do in Isaiah — some pointing to Rome and also to the end of the world. The problem is that we can never know for sure that a dual fulfillment is in view unless the inspired text tells us, as it does with Isaiah 25. But that also means that we can't rule out a dual fulfillment. We may be seeing one here for example — the persecuted Christians will receive these blessings when Rome is judged, but they will also receive these blessings at the end of time. All we know for certain is that the context and the time frame and the usage elsewhere in the Bible tell us that Rome is in view here.

So then what is the message here to the church? It is this: Rome is going to be judged, but good things are going to happen to you! You are going to be victorious! Rome will weep, but you will not. Rome will be burned by fire, but

you will not. Rome will face hunger and thirst, but not you. Jesus loves and cares for his church! You have been sealed, and you will come out of this victorious if you remain faithful unto death.

***Matthew 16:25** — For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.*

Doesn't that fit the context of this book? Doesn't that fit the time frame of this book? Yes, it does. If I treated this book like a cafeteria line and if all I saw was verses 16-17, then I might think we are talking about the end of the world, but those are not the only two verses in this book. We need to study those two verses in the context of the four hundred or so verses that surround it, not to mention the other thirty thousand or so verses in the Bible.

Was this a **physical** deliverance? No. We know that all who follow Christ will face persecution, and that was especially true for these early Christians. Our deliverance is a **spiritual** deliverance, **both then and now**. We must see things as God sees them, and God's view is from all eternity. By God's view, our lives on this earth are just vapors that appear for a short while and then vanish away. God is much more concerned about our spiritual life, and of course we should be as well.

Yes, the church overcame mighty Rome just as Daniel prophesied in Daniel 2:44. How? By following the example of Christ, who overcame the world through his perfect sacrifice. The inspired text will tell us later exactly how the church overcame Rome.

***Revelation 12:11** — And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death.*

We are not looking at a **physical** deliverance here — but we are looking at a deliverance, and this deliverance does not **avoid** death but rather **embraces** death. When Jesus calls a man, he bids him to come and die. Death is not the end for a Christian; it is the beginning.

So far we have seen Jesus' power and worthiness to judge, we have heard a demand for judgment from the martyrs, we have had a taste of the terror of an approaching judgment, and we have seen that God's people will be safe and victorious.

The next events that we will see will be scenes of tremendous action, but before that happens Chapter 8 will begin with a short period of awed and breathless silence and anticipation.