

How many times have you heard someone say that the world has gone crazy? Maybe you've even said it yourself many times. But it's gotten to the point where it doesn't even phase us anymore most of the time. Most of the time we just try to ignore it the best we can and move on to something else, to just get on with our lives as best as we can. But every now and then something happens that really affects us, that really makes us stop and ask: how are we going to get through this? How are we going to deal with this? Where is our hope in the midst of a world that has lost its mind? But Revelation shows us why we're going to get through, Christians. It shows us why we can be confident. We can be confident even when the world around us is crumbling into nothing, because Jesus is our promise through God his Father. We can trust in him through all these things.

Because in the previous chapter of Revelation, Revelation chapter 6, it paints a picture of the world full of troubles. Christ the Lamb is holding in his hands a scroll sealed with seven seals, wax seals which are holding the document closed. And Christ begins to break each one of these seals open and something happens in the world as a result. So the first seal is broken, and a white horse appears. And his rider has in his hand a bow, going forth conquering and to conquer. He is a symbol of war and all of the destruction that comes with it in the world. And the second seal is broken, and a red horse appears, and his rider has a sword in his hand. And he is a symbol of civil war, of a nation at war with itself, of troubles within a country. And the third seal is broken, and a black horse appears, and his rider has a pair of scales in his hands. And he is a symbol of economic problems, of an economy which is crumbling, of inflation running out of control. And the fourth seal is broken, and a pale horse appears, and Death is his rider and Hades follows him. He is a symbol of death, of disease, of famine, and all of the troubles that go along with it. And Christians, do we not see the four horsemen at work in our world today? We live in a world full of war, full of troubles within our nation, with an economy that's collapsing, inflation running out of control. This is just as true for our time as it was for John's. A world full of troubles that we experience all the time.

But now the fifth seal is broken, and the martyrs who are in heaven cry out to God from underneath the altar, saying, "How long, O Lord? How long until you will avenge our blood on the earth? How long until you will give us justice?" And so they are a picture showing us that some Christians will lose their lives, and it will continue until all the number of the martyrs are complete. And the sixth seal is broke open, and there is a great earthquake. The sun turns to black, the moon turns to blood, and stars fall from the sky. It is a symbol of those big moments in history when a nation collapses, when it crumbles into nothing. We're told in Isaiah chapter 13, talking about Babylon: "The stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light. The sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light." Isaiah was talking about the fall of Babylon. And so all of these things are pictures of the end of the country, of a country crumbling into nothing because of destruction or being conquered. One of the worst things that we could possibly experience in all the history of the world.

So Revelation 6 gives us a picture, then, of a world full of troubles, whether the troubles that we experience all the time or those troubles that only come from time to time. And any one of them would be enough to cause us distress, but all of them together leaves us with a sense of doom and gloom. What are we supposed to do in the midst of these troubles? Where is our hope in the midst of a world gone crazy?

But the seventh seal has not yet been broken. That is a symbol of the Last Day, a symbol of when Christ will return. And in the time between the sixth seal and the seventh, the time we're now living in, another picture appears. Revelation 7, verse 1 says: "After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree." The winds here are a symbol of all the troubles in the world. I think we could understand that on a day like today with the winds being what they are, being destructive, being bitter, being cold, symbolic of all the things that we suffer in this life. But the winds are held back. They're not allowed to blow during this time. They're not allowed to disrupt or to interrupt what is about to happen.

Because now an angel comes up with the rising of the sun, with a seal of God in his hand. And he is told to seal the servants of the living God. Just like in Ezekiel where another angel is told to pass through Jerusalem. And at that time, in Ezekiel 9, it says: "The Lord said to him, 'Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sign and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it.'" Put a mark on their heads. Stamp them. Seal them. Mark them as people who are sick and tired of what is happening in Jerusalem. Mark them as people who want to follow God. Mark them as God's saints. And this is exactly what the angel in Revelation is doing, marking the people of God, even in the midst of all of the troubles of the world, so that nothing will be able to hurt them. Nothing will be able to take them away from the Lord.

And we are told that 144,000 were sealed in this way, 12,000 from each of the tribes of Israel. And that 144,000 is not a literal number. Anybody who tells you that it is misunderstands what's happening here. 144,000 is a symbolic number, a symbol of the whole Church of God from one end of time to the other. Because we need to do a little bit of math to understand what's going on here. 12 times 12 is 144, and 12 is a number of the Church, a symbol of the Church. Because there were 12 tribes of Israel, just as there were 12 apostles, so 12 times 12 gives us 144, a picture of the whole Church, whether of the Old Testament or of the New. That's why we have that part of the number. And 1000 is 10 times 10 times 10. 10 is a number of wholeness, a number of completion, just like we round up to the nearest 10 many times. We understand that it is a number complete in itself. So 1000, then, is 10 times 10 times 10, or in other words all times all times all. It is everything. It is everything put together into one. So 144,000, then, is every saint of God. Everyone who has ever believed in the Lord from the beginning of time until when our Lord returns. That's the picture that we see here in the first part of Revelation chapter 7. And they're called the tribes of Israel, because we are Israel, spiritual Israel: those who believe in the Lord.

But the list itself is interesting, Christians. The list itself teaches us something about what the Church is, because it's unlike any list like this in the Old Testament. First of all, because Judah is listed first. But Judah wasn't the firstborn. Reuben was the firstborn. Judah was the fourth son of Leah. So why is Judah listed first? Judah is first because Jesus came from the tribe of Judah. And so he is put first because he is our head. He is the head of the body, his Church. Judah being first in this list gives us hope, because it shows that we belong to Christ even in the midst of all of the troubles of this life.

The second thing we notice is that Levi is also in this list. But that's unusual, because Levi had no physical inheritance. Deuteronomy chapter 10 tells us: "Levi has no portion or inheritance with his brothers. The Lord is his inheritance, as the Lord your God said to him." So in other words, the picture that we see here shows us that the Church is not looking forward to some physical promise. We are not looking forward to anything on this earth. We are looking forward to our inheritance in the Lord, to belong to him forever. And that's why Levi is also in this list.

But the third thing we notice is that Dan is not in this list. We would expect to find Dan somewhere near Naphtali, his brother, but he's not there at all. Why is Dan not here? Because Dan was the tribe that first fell into idolatry, and they continued in their idolatry the longest. In other words, excluding Dan from this list shows us a Church that is pure. A Church that is free from sin, from idolatry, from unfaithfulness. It is the true church of God, those who truly follow after him. And the true saints of God are being sealed in the midst of all of their troubles, so that they will belong to the Lord forever.

But now the picture changes again. A great multitude appears, far beyond our ability to count, as numerous as the stars of heaven or as the sand on the seashore. And this great multitude comes out of every tribe and nation and people and language. This great multitude is also a picture of the Church, same as the 144,000, but looking at her in a different way. Because the great multitude stands before the throne, worshiping God the Father and the Lamb. And they are clothed in white robes, holding palms in their hands. In John's time, that was a symbol of victory, because when Romans won a great victory, they went in a parade dressed in white, holding palm branches. So we see here a picture of the Church victorious, a picture of the great Church at rest. A Church which no longer has to struggle. A Church which no longer has to fight. A Church which is worshiping God forever, giving him praise for all the things that he has done.

Because this great Church, Christians, has come out of the great tribulation. Their robes have been washed white in the blood of the Lamb, their sins forgiven forever. And God himself dwells among them as their God. No longer will they hunger. No longer will they thirst. No longer will they suffer any scorching heat. All symbols of the troubles that we now face. All of those things will be gone forever, and God himself will be with them. The Lamb will be their shepherd, leading them to springs of living water, that is, leading them to the Holy Spirit. And God the Father himself will wipe away every tear from their eyes. No trouble will ever be allowed to touch them again.

Christians, this is what waits for us. This is the glory that will be ours. This is the promise of God to all of those who trust in him, to all who hold on him by faith. And the saints who have already died, who have gone on before us, are now experiencing some of this glory. They see God face to face forever. But their joy will be complete when we join them in eternity. Because then, as the one church of God, we will stand before the throne of the Lamb forever, giving him glory and thanksgiving and praise for all that he has done. That is what we look forward to in eternity.

So how can we face a world, then, that has lost its mind? By holding onto God, by trusting in him, knowing that what we suffer is not in vain. Because God will never abandon his Church, Christians. God will never allow the things of this world to take us away from him. And everything that we're suffering right now will pass away. It will be no more. And the joy and the

victory that is Christ's will be ours in eternity. God himself will be with us, wiping away every tear, sheltering us from every trouble. So stand firm. Do not lose hope. Christ's victory will be yours forever, because God has promised you all of these things through Jesus Christ, his Son.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have made us one body in your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us always to remain steadfast in the midst of all of our troubles, knowing that you have prepared a glory for us far beyond our ability to comprehend, and you have promised these things to us in Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.