

Our previous chapter ended with a question as the great ones of the world cried out in verses 16 and 17: "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" And the reason why they cried this out, Christians, is because they are afraid. Their long-deserved judgment has finally fallen on them from the Lord, and they don't want to face God. They would rather be crushed under the mountains and the rocks than to face the wrath of the Lamb. And so they cry out: "Who is able to stand before the Lord?" And in light of everything that we've seen up to this point, Christians, especially in chapter 6, I think this question is one we also need to ask. Who is able to stand? Who can stand before the wrath of God? Does anybody have a chance before the judgment seat of Christ? And faced with all of the things that we see in this world--wars and turmoil and hard times and all of those things--can we have any hope at all? Who can stand?

And to answer this question, John begins our reading for today. Because chapter 7 here is the beginning of an interlude between the sixth and the seventh seals. We'll see this kind of interruption in other places in the book too. But at this point in this interlude, John sees a vision of what is happening on the earth. We're told in verse 1 of our reading: "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." So these angels who are holding back the four winds are standing at the four corners of the earth. You can imagine angels standing at four different points on a compass, but the diagonal points on the compass, things like the northeast and the northwest. Those are the ones where they're standing. Because in that part of the world, Christians, it is the diagonal winds that are considered to be especially destructive. Paul, for example, in Acts chapter 27 is shipwrecked by a wind that comes out of the northeast. They are the ones that cause the most destruction. And we here in North Dakota know perfectly well how destructive winds can be. Just look at the destruction up around Hazen: all the trees that were uprooted, the campers that were destroyed around Beulah Bay, even entire fields which have just been simply wiped away, all before the power of the wind that came with that storm last week. We know the kind of destruction that can come along with these things.

And so these destructive winds, then, are symbols of the destructive forces that we have seen up to this point in chapter 6, especially the four horsemen. And we know this because in the book of Zechariah, which also talks about the four horsemen, they are compared explicitly with the four winds. An angel says to Zechariah in Zechariah chapter 6: "These," that is, the four horsemen, "are going out to the four winds of heaven after presenting themselves before the Lord of all the earth." So the wind and the horsemen are closely tied together. And as we saw before, the four horsemen are symbols of these destructive things like war and hard times and so forth. And if they were not held back, nothing would be able to stand. If all there was war and trouble and hardship and famine, would anyone be able to stand? So these things are held back, at least for a time, so that they cannot interfere with what is about to happen.

Because John now sees a vision of another angel, verses 2 and 3 of our reading: "Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, saying, 'Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.'" So this angel coming out of the east has in his hands a great seal with which he is going to mark the foreheads of all of those who belong to God. He is going to put that seal upon

them so that we can know who it is that actually is God's. This is very similar to what happens in the book of Ezekiel as well, because Ezekiel saw a vision of a coming judgment upon Jerusalem. And he heard God say to an angel with a pen in his hand, Ezekiel chapter 9: "Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it." So that angel, then, was commanded to take that pen and to put a mark on everyone who was disgusted with the idolatry that was happening in Israel, who were completely disgusted with the idolatry that was happening even in the temple itself, who were sighing and groaning because they wanted to follow after God. They trusted in him alone, even in the midst of all of those who had turned away from him. That mark on their heads showed that they belonged to God. And God also told other angels to then pass through the city and to destroy those who did not have a mark, those who had turned away from God. So just like in Exodus with the Passover, when the blood was put on the doorposts of Israel in Egypt, the angel of destruction would pass over those who had the mark to bring judgment down upon those who had turned away from God. And it's the same way here in Revelation: the seal, the mark on the forehead, shows who is God's and who trusts in him.

But what is this seal, we might ask? It's nothing physical. It's not something visible like a tattoo or a pen mark on the head. That's not it at all. Rather, like many things in the book of Revelation, it too is a symbol. It is a symbol of the gift of the Holy Spirit. And we know this because of what Paul says in Ephesians chapter 1, when he is talking about Christ. Paul writes: "In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory." So Paul tells us very clearly, then, the seal is the Holy Spirit. The hour that we first believed, Christians, the hour that we heard of the Word and trusted in God, the Holy Spirit was given to us. God sealed us in that moment and made us heirs of heaven. We now belong to him. And we have been sealed through his Word and through his Sacraments. That is what the seal is that we see here in Revelation.

But the Spirit is also the guarantee, Paul says. You could even translate that as a down payment or an earnest money, something which you give to show that you are intent on doing something, like the money that you give in order to buy a house, to show that you are serious about the deal. The Holy Spirit is that down payment. The Holy Spirit is the guarantee that God has made us heirs of heaven. And when we have been sealed with the Spirit, we know that we will inherit heaven. We know that we belong to God, because he has sealed us with the Spirit, and nothing can take that away.

So now we have the answer to our question. Who can stand? Those who have been sealed by God, those who belong to him, who trust in him by faith. They do not stand because of their own strength. They do not stand because of their own power. They stand because of what God has done for them. If we do not have this seal, Christians, we will stumble and fall. There is so much going on in the world today that might make us lose hope, that might make us think that there is no point whatsoever. But when we have been sealed, it means that our faith does not fail. Even what we have to endure, even what we have to go through will strengthen us rather than hurt us, because God will keep us safe through what he has done for us.

Now, I do want to be clear here. The seal does not mean that we will not suffer. God does not promise that we will avoid suffering, especially in the body in this life. In fact, Jesus promises us

that our lives will very often be harder because we believe in him. Being a Christian does not mean that we will not suffer in the body, but being a Christian means that we will be safe in the soul. It means that God has our spirits in his hands. And even if we physically suffer for him, we are spiritually safe because of what he has done for us. It's just like Luther's hymn, A Mighty Fortress, which puts it so well: "And take they our life, / Goods, fame, child, and wife, / Though these all be gone, / Our victory has been won! / The Kingdom ours remaineth." We know that even if everything were taken away, that if we were to lose everything that we have, even our very lives, the Kingdom is still ours because of what God has done for us!

But maybe we still want to ask one more question here, Christians: how do I know that this includes me? Maybe this is only meant for certain people. Maybe this is only meant for some Christians. Because it's really hard to stand firm when faced with all of the things in this world. And it's even harder when it seems like we're alone, like we're the only ones who care about God anymore. How can I know that I am a part of the Kingdom? How can I know and have any certainty that the Kingdom is mine?

To answer that question, Christians, John gives us one more vision in our reading for today: the 144,000 out of the tribes of Israel. The 144,000, Christians, are a picture of the entire Church, all of those who belong to God, all of those who believe in him. They are the ones who have been sealed. And we know that they are a picture of the whole Church for three reasons. First of all, because of the number itself. 144,000 is a number of the Church, is 144,000 is twelve times twelve times a thousand. Twelve is a number of the Church: the twelve tribes, the twelve apostles, and so forth. Multiply it together, you get 144, so that number, then, is a symbol of the Church, all who believe in God. And a thousand is ten times ten times ten. Ten is a complete number. It's a whole number. And if you triple it by itself, that's like saying absolutely everything, every time and place, the whole completion. Everything. So put the two numbers together, then, and you have 144,000, every believer who has ever lived in every time and place. They are the ones who have been sealed.

The second reason why we know that the 144,000 is a picture of the whole Church is because of the tribes of Israel. Because this isn't just talking about some people, as if this was just about Jews or something like that. No, this is a picture of the whole Church, Christians, because the Church is Israel. Everyone who believes in God belongs to Israel. When we believe in Jesus, we are now sons of Abraham. Every promise that has ever been made to Israel is ours because of what Jesus has done for us. As Paul says, there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ. We all belong by faith.

The third and the last reason that we know that 144,000 is a picture of the whole Church is because if you are paying attention to the list, you might notice that there are two tribes that are missing: Dan and Ephraim. And the reason why that they are missing, Christians, is because of their idolatry. Dan in the Old Testament fell into idolatry first and continued in it the longest. And the tribe of Ephraim led to many of the other tribes also into idolatry. So in a sense, for the purposes of this symbol, they showed that they don't actually belong to God. And so that's why they're not in the list. But those who are here, then, do belong. They show that they truly trust in God. They show that they are truly following after him. And for that reason, they are here. And so no matter what happens, Christians, those who believe belong to the Church, because they

have been sealed with the Spirit of God. And we can now endure and wait with hope as we wait for God to bring an end to all things and to give us the deliverance that we have been waiting for.

So Christians, remember, you belong to God. You were sealed with the Spirit the hour that you first believed. He will strengthen you to face all things. He will bring you to himself. And even if you must physically suffer, even if everything is taken away, no matter what happens, your spirit is safe within his hands. So trust him, because he will not fail to give you what he has promised to give you through his Son, Jesus Christ.

Let us pray. O mighty and living God, who is the stronghold of your people in every trouble, keep our eyes always fixed on you, knowing that you will not fail to bring us to our inheritance in heaven, because you have given us the gift of your Holy Spirit. To you, together with the Son and the Holy Spirit, be all glory and praise, now and forever. Amen.