

Revelation 7

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Date: 14 July 2019

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] How many of you watched the Federer-Nadal semifinal on Friday?

It was very hyped up, understandably. If you did watch that semifinal at Wimbledon, maybe you'll agree that it didn't quite reach the heights of the 2008 final, but it certainly had its moments, especially at the end as Federer looked to close out the match, and a few match points came and went before finally he managed to secure that victory.

And in what proved to be the final set, as Nadal valiantly sought to prolong the duel, the commentator, a former Wimbledon winner himself, Boris Becker, assured us who were watching the proceedings that Nadal, and I quote, wants to keep asking Roger the ultimate question.

And when he said that, it kind of my ears pricked up, and I thought, well, that's an interesting thing to say. Nadal was wanting to keep asking Roger the ultimate question.

Now, what was that ultimate question? Well, it turns out that the ultimate question, in Boris's estimation, was could Federer serve out the match?

[1 : 19] That was the ultimate question. Now, in fairness, in the context of a Wimbledon semifinal, I suppose that just about qualifies as an ultimate question.

But what about beyond the frenzied and cozy confines of SW19, of Wimbledon? What about in the big, bad world in which we all live?

What is the ultimate question? I wonder if you have any ideas or suggestions in your own mind. You maybe can just ponder on that. What would you consider to be the ultimate question?

Let me suggest that in the closing words of the sixth chapter of Revelation, the ultimate question is posed.

There in verse 17 of Revelation chapter 6, we read, For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?

[2 : 23] Or put simply, who can stand? Who can stand? I'd like to propose to you that that is the ultimate question.

Who can stand? That is the ultimate question that you need to grapple with. This is the ultimate question that every man and woman needs to grapple with and discover the answer to, who can stand?

We need to explain a little bit what that question even refers to. John's vision that we have recorded for us here in Revelation, at this point in the vision, is anticipating the return of Jesus in glory and judgment.

Jesus comes, He will come, to judge the living and the dead. And the vision poses this solemn question in the light of His coming, anticipating His certain coming.

On that day, who can stand? Who can stand before the resplendent holiness and magnificent majesty of the Lamb who was slain on that great and dreadful day?

[3 : 42] In the literal meaning of that word, dreadful. Who can stand? As we've read in chapter 6, the vision makes it very clear to us that the kings of the earth can't stand.

The princes, the generals, the rich, and the mighty can't stand. Indeed, we're told that everyone, both slave and free, is incapable of standing on that great and dreadful day of the Lord.

Indeed, we're told that they will all cry out to the mountains and the rocks, fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb.

And yet, there is hope. The following chapter, chapter 7, functions as a kind of interlude between the opening of the sixth and the seventh seal.

In chapter 6, we've been looking, or last Sunday morning, we were seeing the opening of the first six of the seven seals. Notice there in verse 12 of chapter 6, I watched as He opened the sixth seal.

[4 : 45] And then in chapter 8, in verse 1, we read when He opened the seventh seal. So, you have the sixth seal and the seventh seal. And then chapter 7, in between, a kind of interlude between the opening of these two seals.

And what purpose does this interlude serve? Well, a very important purpose in that what it does, among other things, is answer that ultimate question. Who can stand?

And the answer is given, as it tends to be in a vision, by means of a picture painted that John sees and shares with us.

We're going to read verse 8 of chapter 7, and there we will find the answer to that question, who can stand? As I read the verse, remember, this is a vision.

So, try and picture what it is that John is seeing. In verse 9, rather, of chapter 7, we read, 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 before the Lamb.

[6 : 01] Are you visualizing the scene that John is seeing, this great multitude, splendid in its diversity? But did you notice their posture? You notice their posture there, what John sees.

The very one who had recorded for us that great question at the end of chapter 6, who can stand?

And yet, here he is granted this vision of this great multitude, and what are they doing?

Well, they're standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They're standing. It's possible. There is a way.

There are those who can stand before the throne and before the Lamb. I want to spend a little time considering this chapter as it answers this ultimate question, who can stand?

I think there are three aspects of the answer that we want to consider. First of all, the identity of those who stand. We've been told already that there's this great multitude, but we want to think a little bit more about who are they?

[7 : 07] So, the identity of those who can stand. But we also want to consider the explanation of how they can stand. How is it possible that they can stand when all others are crying out to the mountains?

And so, we find in this chapter an explanation, an answer to that question of how it is that they can stand. But then finally, I want us to think, and no doubt time will mean very fleetingly, the purpose for which they are enabled to stand.

So, we have the question of identity, who they are, the explanation of how they're able, and then finally, the purpose that there is for their being enabled to stand in the manner that they do.

And we'll explore these three aspects by posing and answering three questions. First of all, who are these people? Who are these people? Then, how can these people stand? And then thirdly, what are these people doing?

So, who are these people? Who are these people standing before the throne and before the Lamb? Well, we've read verse 9, and we can read on what it goes on to say in verse 10 about this great multitude.

[8 : 17] We read there, and they, those who are standing, they cried out in a loud voice, salvation belongs to our God. These people identify God as their God.

These people who are standing before the throne are God's people. They are God's saved people. Salvation belongs to our God. The people there are disciples of Jesus.

Indeed, in this part of the vision, in chapter 7, God's people are presented in two ways, or two pictures are employed. They're pictured as a militant army divided into regiments.

You have these 12 tribes of Judah, and it kind of reminds us of when David counted his armies, and for each tribe there was a number assigned. And so, God's people are presented in that way as a militant throng, but also as a triumphant host.

The great multitude there standing before the throne. And to be clear, it's my understanding, I think the arguments for this are strong and convincing, that the 144,000 spoken of at the beginning of the chapter and the great multitude spoken of in the second part of the chapter are the same people.

[9 : 36] The same people presented in two different ways. And the two different pictures serving to highlight two complementary truths about God's people.

And what are these truths? Well, first of all, the 144,000 or 12,000 from every tribe. I think that the precision of that number serves to represent the completeness of their number.

Everyone intended by God is there. No one is missing. We come across the same numbers in chapter 21 of Revelation in the description of the New Jerusalem.

And the New Jerusalem is pictured as a perfect cube, 12,000 stadia in length, in breadth, and in height. And the picture that has been painted of something that is perfect and complete. So too with God's people. Perfect and complete. No one is missing. All those God intends to be there are there. Nobody slips through the net.

[10:47] And so the first picture highlights the completeness of God's people. But the second picture of this great multitude standing before the throne, well, that represents the vastness and the diversity of their number.

And some might quibble that, well, how is it that in the first picture we're given a number and then we're immediately told that you can't count them? It seems contradictory. But this is a vision. And in a vision of this nature that is permissible, not intended to be so pedantic as to pose that kind of question.

The second picture does highlight the vast number of the redeemed, but also the diversity of them. A great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people, and language standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

Let us be under no illusions. Though at times it might appear that God's people are a small and declining remnant in the grand scheme of things.

The number of God's people is vast and beyond counting. Indeed, the picture that's painted here of this great multitude that no one could count reminds us of and indeed serves as a fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham.

[12:09] Remember back in Genesis when God promised Abraham descendants so great a number that they could not be counted. Greater than the number of the stars in the sky or sand on the seashore.

And indeed in the promises God gave to Abraham, there was also this anticipation of Abraham being the father of many nations. And so these promises that were given to Abraham so long ago, finding beautiful fulfillment in this great multitude in heaven before the throne.

Who are these people standing before the throne and before the Lamb? They are God's people.

They are our people. They are your people. Vast in number. Beautiful in their colorful diversity.

And no one is missing. Each and every one chosen in eternity, present in glory. Well, it's the first question. Who are these people? But the second question is this.

How can these people stand? How can they remain standing before the throne and before the Lamb? How can they stand when all and sundry are calling on the mountains to hide them?

[13:19] What marks them out? What enables them to stand? Well, I think in the vision we discover two core and complementary truths about these people. First of all, we're told that they are sealed.

But also we're told that they are saved. Though the word or the verb saved is not employed, we do read of salvation belonging to our God.

So they are sealed and they are saved. And these two verbs, they don't really communicate different truths about these people, but the same central truth from different angles.

And let's think about them both. First of all, they are sealed by God. In verses 1 to 3 of chapter 7, we have this picture painted of God's servants being sealed by the angel.

And the language there in chapter 7, though time doesn't allow us to delve into it, it's drawn from the language that Ezekiel uses in the ninth chapter of his prophecy.

[14:21] You see, what we're being reminded of here at the beginning of this chapter is that God's people live in the same world, afflicted and battered by the deadly attacks of the four horsemen that we were thinking about last Sunday morning.

Warfare and violence and persecution and famine and disease and death. We're not spared these things. We experience these things also. In this part of the vision, the four horsemen of chapter 6 become, as it were, the four destructive winds that are spoken of in chapter 7.

After this, I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent them from continuing their rampaging destruction.

God's people, together with all people, are in danger. But what John discovers, what John is told, is that God's people enjoy God's protection. You see, we're told that there are four angels holding back the four winds to limit or detain their destructive force.

But for what purpose? Why do they detain the four winds? Well, they do so, we're told, to allow another angel, who hold the seal of the living God to put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of

God.

[15:46] It's a striking thing, and maybe this is just me, but it's maybe worth noting and reflecting on how, you know, people get so excited about and intrigued by the mark of the beast, as it's spoken of in Revelation.

Oh, that's something we want to know about. And yet much more fascinating and much more wonderful for us is to think about the mark of the Lamb. You see, God's people sealed by the Lamb. And what's the meaning and the purpose of this seal? Well, the seal signifies two connected realities. The seal, first of all, signifies ownership. These people belong to God.

And the intimacy of the relationship is made beautifully clear subsequently in chapter 14 of Revelation. In chapter 14 and verse 1, once again, we are presented with these 144,000, but the nature of the seal is made more explicit.

In chapter 14 and verse 1, we read, What was this seal?

[17:05] Well, the seal sealed God's people with His name. The name of Jesus, the name of the Father, is the nature of the seal written on their foreheads.

And what does this signify? Well, it signifies that we belong to God. It signifies ownership, but then it also signifies, and the two are very connected, it signifies protection.

We are protected because we belong to God. It's the name that protects us. The devil and his hosts are forbidden from harming those who are sealed by God.

The psalm is sung of that confidence. How can my enemies harm me? I belong to God. Now, you might come back to me and rightly so and say, Well, it doesn't look like that in the real world. It doesn't look like God's people are protected. We can and do, and many of our brothers and sisters in much more intense ways than we do, but we can and do suffer greatly for the faith.

[18:09] God's people suffer mockery and derision. They suffer physical harm, privation of liberty, and even death. But never ultimate spiritual harm or destruction.

We are never snatched from the loving embrace of our God. We are sealed. We enjoy the mark of the Lamb. Just as the Israelites in Egypt enjoyed protection when the doorposts of their homes were marked by the blood of the Passover Lamb, so we enjoy protection as those marked or sealed by God.

Why can they stand? Well, they stand because they are sealed, but they stand also because they are saved by God.

The practical question that arises is this. How are God's people, you and me, sealed by God? What does that look like? We can maybe understand the concept as pictured in the vision, and we can say, yes, a seal, that represents ownership and protection.

We can understand that. But in our lives, how does that happen? How does God seal us? How can we be sure that He has sealed us?

[19:22] Well, God seals us by saving us. We can take a step back or sideways and look to the passage that we read in Ephesians 1, verses 11-14.

And the connection between these verses in Paul's letter and Revelation, that the particular connection is this language of being sealed, that we have been marked in Him with a seal.

And so that establishes the connection. But what I want to draw out from the verses in Ephesians are two expressions that Paul uses, and I want to think about these two expressions in the light of what we read in Revelation 7.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul is addressing the believers, and he speaks about when you believed. When you believed, there in verse 13 of chapter 1. When you believed, you were marked in Him with a seal.

So these two elements. When you believed, you were marked. And I want to think about these two things. When you believed, you were marked, but in the light of what we find in Revelation. First of all, when you believed.

[20:31] When and how does that happen? Well, the vision tells us by means of this dialogue that there is between John and one of the elders. In verses 13 and 14, back in Revelation chapter 7.

Then one of the elders asked me, These in white robes, who are they and where did they come from? He could well have asked, how is it that they can stand? And John answered, Sir, you know. And the elder answered, These are they who have come out of the great tribulation. All the suffering as a result of the horsemen and all the affliction that we've already heard of.

They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. When you believed. How are we saved?

How are we made, if I can invent a word, how are we made stand worthy before God? What is it that we have to believe? We believe or trust in God's diagnosis of our condition and the remedy that He provides.

[21 : 35] We are filthy. The robes that speak of our identity and of our moral equality, they are filthy. They need to be washed. And notice these two necessary elements that together constitute or are necessary or result in our salvation.

Recognizing our need, recognizing our condition, and trusting in God's provision. We recognize that we are sinners, that we are filthy, that we are unworthy, that we cannot stand before God.

We recognize that in ourselves, we too would have to cry out to the mountains, fall upon us. We acknowledge that to be so. We cast aside our pride that makes us imagine that we're all right, we're okay.

And we recognize the truth and the reality of our condition, but we don't leave it there. We then trust in God's provision for our cleansing, the blood of Jesus.

The picture is intriguing, perhaps even repellent for some. And I get that, how it can seem repellent. How can filthy robes be washed in blood? Apart from anything else, blood you wouldn't imagine wouldn't clean anything.

[22 : 45] But the very idea of blood cleansing is a difficult one for us to get our heads round. But what we need to understand is that to speak of the blood of Jesus is simply to speak of His death.

To speak of His death in our place, of His atoning death in the place of sinners. The Lamb died for His sheep. He died in our place.

He paid the penalty for our sins. He bore the righteous anger of God. His own wrath in our place. Hence, His blood that speaks of His death cleanses our robes and makes them white.

We are saved when we believe or trust in Jesus, when we trust in Him and in His saving and cleansing work on our behalf. When you believed, says Paul to the Christians in Ephesus, when you believed, you were marked.

Those who believed are marked or sealed. You were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit. The seal is not simply the name of God.

[23 : 59] Wonderful, though that would be. But God Himself in the person of His Spirit indwelling us. The devil can no more harm us than he can harm God.

He can no more touch you than he can touch God. And if He does touch you, it is by God's design for your good. Paul says, when you believed, you were marked.

Or to use the language of Revelation 7, when you were saved, you were sealed. When you were washed, you were sealed. This is why these people, God's people, can stand.

God has saved them. God has sealed them. God has made them in Jesus worthy. In Jesus, we are stand worthy.

Who are these people? Why can they stand? But finally, what are these people doing? As I anticipated, we'll have to very fleetingly make our way through an answer to that question.

[25 : 04] What are these people doing before the throne and before the Lamb? We're especially interested in our ultimate purpose and mission in the new heaven and the new earth as those saved and sealed by God, as described, at least in part, in the vision.

But notice that the picture of the 144,000 in the first half of the chapter that I'm suggesting is the church militant here on earth, protected and sealed by God in the midst of tribulation.

That reminds us of our present mission as soldiers of Jesus. And what is our mission? Well, to conquer the world for Jesus. And this battle is not waged with weapons of war, but with the good news concerning Jesus, spoken by men and women living lives sacrificially for Jesus.

That is how this army rolls, telling other people about Jesus and living for and like Jesus. That said, let's now notice the mission of those standing before the throne as flagged up in the vision by the therefore of verse 15.

You see, in the previous verse, we've been told how it is that they've been cleansed, how it is that they're able to be there in heaven standing before the throne. But then we're told what they're doing, the purpose for which God has so saved and sealed them.

[26 : 25] Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve Him day and night in His temple. And the vision continues. What are these people doing?

Why does God save and seal His people? What will occupy us in heaven, in the new heaven and the new earth? Well, we will be, indeed we already are, a people who praise God, a people who serve God, and a people who enjoy God.

We will praise God. We will join with those in heaven who sing, salvation belongs to our God. There in verse 10. Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

And notice here in the vision that the knock-on effect of God's people, of those standing before the throne, honoring God in this way, the knock-on effect, as the angels join in, as the angels respond to what they see of God's people praising God.

Verse 11, all the angels were standing around the throne. And when they hear what God's people are crying out, what do they say? Well, they begin with, Amen. And that makes the connection with what God's people have been crying out.

[27 : 37] And the angels say, Amen. As they ponder on the magnitude of the scene that is before them, God's people, this great multitude, standing before the throne. And they cry out, Amen.

The angels are fascinated. They rejoice in what they see. Reminds us of what we read there in Peter's first letter, that intriguing reference to the salvation of God's people and how angels long to look into these things.

Well, in heaven, the angels witness these things and they praise God for them. What will occupy us in heaven, in the new heavens and the new earth, well, we will praise God.

But we will serve God. In verse 15, we've read, Therefore they are before the throne of God and serve Him day and night in His temple. And no doubt the service includes our praise of God, but it goes beyond our verbal praise.

We think of what that means for us today. For us today, this describes lives lived in the service of God. Perhaps especially as captured by the language of Paul in Romans chapter 12, where he speaks of God's people offering up their lives as a living sacrifice to God.

[28 : 58] We will praise God. We will serve God. But also we will enjoy God. In the second half of verse 15, we read of how the one who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence.

We will enjoy first and foremost His presence. He will shelter us with His presence. Even the language is beautiful and evocative. He will shelter us.

He will shelter you with His presence. And that presence of the Almighty, sheltered under the wings of the Almighty, brings with it a myriad of blessings in its train.

We enjoy His provision and protection. Never again will they hunger. Never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them, nor any scorching heat.

We enjoy His pastoral care for the Lamb at the center of the throne. We'll be their shepherd. You have this vivid picture, this transformation.

[30 : 05] The Lamb becomes a shepherd while remaining a Lamb. The Lamb will become His shepherd. And He will lead them to springs of living water where we will be eternally refreshed by God and by His provision for us.

We will enjoy God's presence. We will enjoy God's care and protection and pastoring. And we will enjoy His tender touch as He wipes away every tear.

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Who can stand? Who can stand? Well, in the vision, we've been given an answer to that question.

Who can stand? Life is short, and it's full of stuff. Now, that is not a deeply philosophical observation.

But it's true. Life is short, and it's full of stuff. And as a result, there is a very real and present danger that we fail to confront the ultimate questions as life passes by before us, soon to end, or as we're consumed or distracted by all the stuff, by all the seemingly ultimate questions that occupy our attention and our priorities.

[31 : 31] And I would urge you to face this ultimate question. Who can stand? On that great and last day that is coming, will you be able to stand?

Will you be among those who call on the mountains and the rocks, fall on us, and hide us? Or will you be among the great multitude crying out, Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

And what will determine who you are and where you are is whether you are trusting in Jesus. Because only in Jesus can you stand before the throne and before the Lamb.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for the manner in which it deals with the reality of our condition in all its gravity, in all its severity.

But we thank you that as our condition is a grave and a terminal one, so your provision is a wonderful and sufficient one. We do thank you for Jesus.

[32 : 47] We thank you for his death and for what his death secures for those who trust in him. And we pray that each of us gathered here this morning would be able to testify humbly and yet joyfully, my hope is in Jesus.

I am trusting in him, in him, and in him alone I can stand. And we pray in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.