

On the Sunday before Jesus was crucified, He rode into Jerusalem triumphantly on a donkey. It was the week of Passover, the highest Jewish feast of the year. Jewish pilgrims came to Jerusalem from all over the world to celebrate this feast. But this year was different. There was a lot of talk about this rabbi called Jesus of Nazareth wondering if he could be the Messiah. On that Sunday, news spread that he was about to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey.

This action in itself carried great significance. People expected their Messiah to ride into Jerusalem triumphantly one day. They also longed for release from the oppressive rule of the Romans. So the large crowd took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him. Palm leaves often symbolized victory or hailed a king. They shouted the word “Hosanna” which means “the Lord saves” or “Lord save us.” They also shouted “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!” The impact of Jesus’ entry on that Palm Sunday shook the religious establishment. They spent the next couple of days trying to trip Him up with questions so they could arrest Him and keep Him away from the people. But they could not trap Him. So they decided to kill him and they would get the Romans to do it for them in the event we now commemorate called Good Friday.

But what happened to the Palm Sunday crowd? They were very excited to see Jesus ride in this way. They must have been encouraged when He continually stumped the corrupt religious rulers with wise answers to their questions. They maybe went home or back to their tents at night sharing the news of Jesus’ latest triumph. Maybe they anticipated that freedom from oppression and victory for their nation was close at hand.

But then Wednesday came and nothing much happened. Then Thursday with growing rumors about a pending arrest of Jesus. By Friday morning, news spread that the Roman Governor would pronounce judgment. He traditionally released one Jewish prisoner to appease the crowds at Passover. Rumor had it that Jesus had been arrested. Surely this would be the moment when He would overthrow the Romans.

But when they brought Him out He looked frail, weak and embarrassing. He was bloody. He had a crown of thorns on his head and some phony royal robe. Soon Pilate asked for a decision and the majority called for the other prisoner to be released while Jesus was sentenced to death. I wonder what happened to the Palm Sunday crowd when Pilate pronounced that verdict?

Some might have joined others who gathered on the way to the cross to see the condemned make their last steps. Some might have hurled insults at Jesus with their disappointment over His failure to take power. Some might have watched helplessly and mourned over another dashed hope. Most went back to their ordinary lives trying to eke out a living while Herod, the temple officials and the Romans figured out new ways to tax them. They may have wondered “what happened to all the promise and potential this young rabbi seemed to bring?”

We can end up thinking similar thoughts. We expect the victorious Christian life. We expect God to provide for us so we can experience a long happy life. We expect God to answer yes to our prayer requests. But He doesn’t. Or something terrible happens in our lives. Christians suffer unfair treatment, financial ruin, family breakup and the death of loved ones just like everyone else. Where is God? Where was His protection? Where is this Christian life of hope, joy and victory? When bad things happen, we can question God’s love and protection over us.

But maybe we’ve got the wrong idea about God’s protection. Maybe we need to adjust our protection expectations. Maybe God protects us in ways we don’t know about. Today we will look at God’s protecting work on behalf of His people. We will discover a different perspective on God’s protection that we need to adopt so we can get through hard happenings in our lives.

All this will come from the next section in our study of Revelation. Last time we ended in Revelation 6 where the great day of God’s wrath arrived. The people on the earth cried out “Who can stand?” John’s next vision answers this question with a description of God’s protecting work on behalf of His people. We will discover the ultimate Palm Sunday celebration occurring in heaven. My prayer is you will leave encouraged today to live courageous hope-filled lives because of God’s protecting work over you. Our text is Revelation 7.

Revelation 7 (ESV)

7 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. ²Then 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, ³saying, “Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.” ⁴And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel:

⁵12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed,

12,000 from the tribe of Reuben,

12,000 from the tribe of Gad,

⁶12,000 from the tribe of Asher,

12,000 from the tribe of Naphtali,
 12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh,
⁷ 12,000 from the tribe of Simeon,
 12,000 from the tribe of Levi,
 12,000 from the tribe of Issachar,
⁸ 12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun,
 12,000 from the tribe of Joseph,
 12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed.

⁹ After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" ¹¹ And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" ¹⁴ I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

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 shelter them with his presence.

¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
 the sun shall not strike them,
 nor any scorching heat.

¹⁷ For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
 and he will guide them to springs of living water,
 and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

The end of Revelation 6 described some hard times coming on the people of the earth. Whenever Revelation talks about the people who dwell on the earth, it usually means unbelievers – those who have rejected God. But in the midst of these judgment visions, John often places an interlude vision. It focuses on believers or those faithful to God. These interludes bring hope and encourage believers who read Revelation. They remind us of God's care in the midst of hard times like the coming judgment.

The last phrase of the previous vision asked the question "who can stand in the day of the wrath of God?" Those asking that question would expect the answer "no one." But this next vision shows those who can stand. The encouragement comes from God's protection of His people.

How does God protect His people? The first 8 verses shows **God protects His people from the judgments of the last days by putting His seal on them.** John sees four angels standing at the four corners of the earth holding back the four winds. These winds would bring harm. So the four angels hold them back to prevent damage to the land, sea or any tree. If the angels unleashed the winds, terrible destruction would follow.

Then John sees a great angel rising from the east where the sun comes from. This great angel commands the other four to not harm the sea, earth or trees before something else gets done. Verse 3 tells us God intended His servants to receive His seal on their foreheads. Remember we learned that ancient seals communicated ownership. Here the seal also marks God's people for protection. The angel prevents the release of these four winds until God's servants on earth can be sealed.

This is not the first time God put a seal or mark on someone for their protection. The earliest example comes in Genesis 4 when God puts a mark on Cain to protect him from others who want to kill him. Then God commands the Israelites in Exodus 12 to put a mark of lamb's blood on their door frames. This would protect them from the death angel going through Egypt. In another vision in Ezekiel 9, the prophet sees angels who will destroy Jerusalem for her unfaithfulness. But before this happens, God commands that those who grieve over Jerusalem's sinfulness be marked on their foreheads to protect them from the destroying angels. Here we see something similar. The servants of God will receive this seal on their foreheads. It will protect them especially in Revelation 9 from the plague of the fifth trumpet.

The actual sealing of God's servants is not described. But in verse 4 John hears the number of the sealed – 144000. Now this number would mean a lot to Jews especially. They came from the 12 tribes of Israel. 144000 relates closely to the number 12. 12 times 12 times 1000 is 144000. If 12 is the number of completeness, this emphasizes perfect completeness in some way. But who are these 144000?

There have been multiple possibilities put forward throughout the centuries. Some argue the 144000 are Jews. John says they were sealed from every tribe of Israel. They are still on the earth. They are about to go through these great judgments. Yet at some point they have come to believe Jesus is in fact their Messiah. So they are Jewish Christians. This perspective is strengthened by the verses which list 12 Jewish tribes of 12000.

But others argue that at the time of writing, the 12 tribes did not clearly exist. Israel originally came from 12 sons who became 12 tribes. But the 10 northern tribes were scattered after they were conquered by the Assyrians in 722.

Many Jews intermarried with the conquering Assyrians. So their lineage became more and more diluted. By the time of Revelation's writing, only those Jews from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin might be able to document their lineage.

On top of this, those who argue that the 144000 were not strictly Jews note that there are several times in the New Testament where the church is referred to as Israel. In Romans 2:28-29, the Apostle Paul writes – “For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.” Peter writes in 1 Peter 2:9 to Christians “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession.” This is the same terminology God used of Israel. So now the church is a holy nation and a chosen people. And in James 1:1, James writing to Christians states “to the 12 tribes in Dispersion.”

So the 144000 as Jewish Christians or the church are the two most prominent interpretation of this number. I lean toward this referring to ethnic Jews for 2 reasons. One – it fulfills the prophecy made by God through Paul in Romans 9-11 that a large number of Jews will turn to Christ in the end. But second, I think this serves to contrast well with the multitude portrayed in the second half of Revelation 7. In the first half, we have the 12 tribes of Israel. In the second half we have people from every tribe. I don't necessarily think that number 144000 is literal. I think it is a symbolic number indicating a large complete group.

God protects this large group of people with his seal. Now you may wonder what this has to do with God's protecting work in our lives today. Here's a couple of important points. First, did you know that if you're a Christian here today, you've already been sealed by God? This happened when we became Christians. Ephesians 1:13-14 – In him you also, when you hear 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 God has already sealed us with His Holy Spirit.

But second, notice the nature of God's protecting seal for His people on earth. His seal does not protect us from dying. Every Christian throughout history since the time of Christ who has been sealed by the Holy Spirit has died or will one day die. Nor does sealing protect us from having to go through trials and tribulations. These 144000 will have to go through the judgments unleashed on the earth. But they will experience some measure of God's protection through them.

This brings us to the question of God's protection over our lives while we live on earth. What kind of protection do we expect? Some Christians seem to think that God will protect them from anything bad. But we're never promised that in the Bible. We live in a fallen world. Christians suffer. So we have to look after a Biblical perspective of God's protection. Eugene Peterson describes God's protection over us while we live on earth like this, **"We are protected from God-separating effects of evil even as we experience the suffering caused by evil."** God can exempt people from judgments or experiencing evil. But sometimes He does not. Christians suffer. Christians die. Yet they persevere in their faith. God protects our eternity by sealing us with the Holy Spirit. God protected us from His wrath through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. God protects us from the devil's attempts to steal our soul. So we might need to adjust our expectations of God's protection.

Yet we may also need to have our blindness exposed to the many ways God protects or blesses us even as we go through hard times. Peterson tells the story of teaching this passage to a small group of people. One member suddenly realized its relevance. Years previously, she had had a nervous breakdown. Her whole life was in chaos. Nothing fit together. She could see no meaning in anything. She felt overwhelmed by evil, and guilt and sheer bad luck.

She was sent to a counselor who guided her to take a good look at each detail that she had lumped into a large pile called evil. Item by item the feelings and events and actions were examined. Not one of them became any less horrible as she did that. But something else happened while she did it. She began to discover other items in her life that had been obscured by the great lump of piled-up evil. She remembered delightful relationships, helpful song and heart-stopping sights. She began to experience how much of her body still worked well. She realized the preciousness of other lives and ways she could appreciate them. Later, she came to know God and the entire world that she now recognized in Revelation 7 came into focus for her.

None of the evil was abolished but it was all in a defined perspective. The nameless evils had names. The numberless wrongs were numbered. Now she could see the countless good and glories that flooded her life. Nothing in her life had changed; everything in her life was changed. She now saw God's active protection even as she walked through those hard times. Maybe we need to step back and name and itemize the hard things in our lives. Once they're out of our head and contained by a piece of paper, we can also begin to see all the ways God continues to protect and provide for us. God protects His people in different ways through hard times.

But God's protection does not end when we die. It grows into ultimate protection. **How does God protect His people in heaven? He will cover us with His presence and provide for us forever.** John receives another vision from heaven in verses 9-17. In the throne room of God He sees a great multitude of people - from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages. He sees Christians from all over the world and from every people group. This fulfills the promises to Abraham that one day a people from all nations will gather before God. Remember the question at the end of Revelation 6? "Who can stand at the great day of Gods' wrath?" What is this innumerable multitude doing? Verse 9 – They are standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

Here's where we get to the ultimate Palm Sunday. They wear white robes which could be the color of victory. At the end of verse 9, they hold palm branches in their hands. It sounds just like Palm Sunday.

But this time there will be no disappointment. There will be no unmet expectations. There will be no delayed victory. But they don't cry – Hosanna – Lord save us. They celebrate the salvation God has provided. Verse 10 – Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!" God has brought the victory. God and the Lamb have accomplished salvation for this multitude. This cry provokes a response by heaven's creatures. The angels, four living creatures and the elders worship God. They pronounce a seven fold blessing upon God in verse 12.

Then one of the Elders asks John about the people's identity. John doesn't know but believes the Elder does. The Elder obliges by revealing in verse 14 – "These are those who have come out of the great tribulation." This could refer to the terrible times of the last days mean somehow this multitude contains those who came through and died in the tribulation. Or it could refer to those throughout history who have endured the great tribulation of their time and remained faithful to Christ.

Then the elder says "They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." We may be so familiar with this terminology that we just pass over it. But for most people, washing a robe in blood did not result in it becoming white. But here is this symbolic description of what was accomplished on the cross. Christ's blood cleansed us from our sins so that we could stand before God and enjoy His presence.

Then comes the piece about God's protection in heaven. Verse 15 – Notice the therefore. As a result of the blood of the Lamb and its protecting work of washing away their sins, this multitude enjoys God's presence. Some of your Bibles

might indent verses 15-17. Whenever Bibles do that, they're showing you some sort of poetry or song or hymn. So this could have been a hymn that the people reading Revelation memorized to see them through their tribulation.

What a hymn! Those in heaven serve God day and night. We're not going sit around a pool in heaven and occasionally get up to go to the buffet. We will worship God and do His work in the new heaven and earth. We will be able to do that without worry of some work stoppage or job loss hindrance or threat from some foreign power. Why? Because he who sits on the throne will shelter them (us) with his presence – literally He will spread his tent over us. It is the picture of desert dweller inviting a stranger under the protection of his tent.

We shall hunger no more; neither thirst. Food and water shortage regularly threatened desert travelers. But those under God's tent don't have to worry about either. We will never hunger or thirst again. Nor will we be exposed to a devastating midday sun or scorching heat. God's tent and presence will protect us.

But on top of that the Lamb in the midst of the throne will shepherd us. How ironic is that? Lambs need a shepherd. This Lamb will be our shepherd. He will bring us to springs of living water. That sounds a lot like the shepherd of Psalm 23. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. Yet the best and most amazing is still to come. "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." How is this possible? Is God going to sit with us and as we think back over lives with regret, he will be ready to wipe away our tears? Or will He wipe away our tears because some loved one is not with us in the innumerable multitude? One commentator thinks not. Instead he says it is like a child who has been crying because of some misfortune or disappointment. Then they are brought into a new situation or given some good news. Suddenly with tears still on their cheeks they break into joy. When God brings His people into presence, the sorrows of this life will suddenly be swallowed up the glory of His presence. And He will wipe away our tears as we enter into His eternal protection.

How do we live in light of God's protection over us?

God does His protecting work over His servants on earth and in heaven. When we accept these realities, we can then **turn to God and seek His power to live courageous hope-filled lives.**

We can live with hope in the midst of our trials and suffering because God does not abandon us. Perhaps one of the greatest images of this reality is God's help for Jesus as He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus sweat drops of blood while He prays and pleads for the cup to be taken from Him. Yet He had to drink it. In Luke 22:43 we read – And

there appeared to him an angel from heaven strengthening him.” Even in the midst of our trials and sufferings, we can rest in God’s protecting work.

We can also live courageous lives that overcome our prejudices. Some Christians throughout our history have harbored prejudice against Jews. How can we do that when our heritage comes from Judaism? There will be Jewish Christians in heaven. We need to start embracing people of Jewish faith now in love to share Christ with them. We also might harbor prejudice against someone from another ethnic group or nation. Maybe there is some historic hatred between your group and another. We humans can so easily adopt nationalistic pride that looks down on foreigners. But there’s no nationalism in heaven. People from every nation gather around the throne.

We will worship the one seated on the throne and the Lamb together. We won’t only worship according to our understanding. We can be so prideful thinking that our way of worship is the only or ultimate way. But listen to what one commentator says - Imagine a multicultural chorus of saints from all ages worshipping God – Israel’s Levites singing the Psalms; clapping African saints with joyful praises; European Reformers with majestic hymns; Gregorian monks with their monotone chants; Latin American Pentecostals with shouts of triumph, messianic Jews dancing the horah, North American street evangelists doing gospel rap. Its worship of the living God, by a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic multitude for eternity. So we need to start practicing that now in our love and attitudes towards others.

Because of God’s protecting work, **we can live courageous lives that proclaim the Gospel despite the danger.** Martyrdom or the killing of God’s people is a consistent reality throughout Revelation. We’ve already seen that we must add the possibility of martyrdom to God’s purpose for our lives. Yet, because of His ultimate protecting work, we need not fear. We’ve been sealed by the Spirit. We are protected from judgment. Our souls are secure in Jesus’ hands. The Gospel is worth it.

We can live hope-filled lives because of God’s eternal protection over us in heaven. Therefore we will be before the throne of God and serve him night and day in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter us with his presence. We shall hunger no more; neither thirst anymore. The sun shall not strike us nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be our shepherd, and he will guide us to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.” To help us ponder this reality further, we will sit and soak in the reality of God’s eternal protection as we listen to our final song.