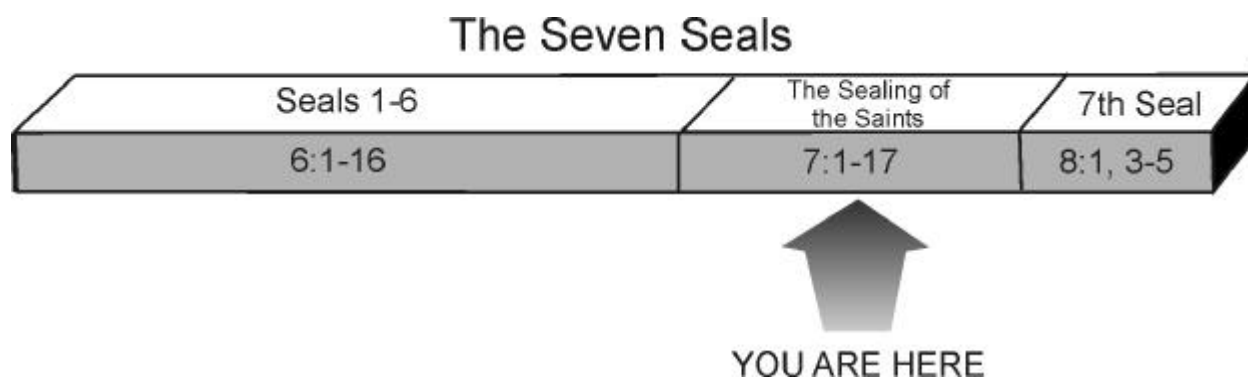


12,000 From 12 Tribes

Revelation 7 is the first major recapitulation in the book. It sits between the sixth and seventh Seals. This location suggests that it will tell us about the seals from a different angle.



When we skipped over this chapter to the seventh Seal, we left the wicked people crying out, **Who is able to stand?** The answer came when **John saw four angels.** They were at **the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds** (7:1). Now, the last time I checked, the world didn't have corners. And wind can come from more than four directions.

This is another place where we have to let yourself see the picture in your mind's eye. Imagine the land spreading away from you as if it was flat. If you look far enough to the east, north, west, and south, you see the end. An angel is standing there. His job is to protect the earth **so that no wind should blow on the earth or on the sea or on any tree.**

Again, we have to think visually. The only reason to hold back the wind is if it's destructive. These angels have the job of protecting the earth from the nasty problems that will come along in the fifth and sixth Trumpets.¹ Those "winds of war" will be really bad news.

Another angel flies up **from the rising of the sun.**² This phrase is rich. It is used seven other times in the Bible,³ and *every* time it tells of God's glory. Even richer is Malachi 4:2, where Jesus is prophesied to be "the sun of righteousness" who will rise from the east. This visual is a way of emphasizing that this angel is coming from God's throne. In a way, we could say this angel is going ahead of Jesus as a messenger. The armies of God will be right behind.

In case you are wondering why I took so much time on a "trivial" item, it's not such a little thing. This direction shows up again in the sixth Bowl, and the work we just did will help us understand it there.

This angel **has the seal of the living God.** This emphasizes the authority of the message. God won't let anything happen to the earth without His consent. In ancient times, official documents were closed up and hot candle wax was dripped on the edge of the paper. Then the king would press his ring into the soft wax, leaving an impression. The seal showed that it was an official document.

¹ By now you've figured out that I'm not really crazy. We'll talk about them in more detail in the next chapter.

² The east. Remember, this is *visual*. The sun rises in the east.

³ Jdg 5:31, Psa 50:1, 133:3, Isa 41:25, 45:6, 59:9, Mal 1:11.

The **angel** commands the **four angels not to harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads** (7:2-3). Does this mean that God will go around with hot wax and a ring and mark all His people? If we take Ezekiel 9:4 literally, the answer would be, “Yes.” But when we look at Exodus 13:9, we discover that eating unleavened bread for seven days is “a reminder on your forehead.” It’s not a visible mark. Instead, it’s a way of saying that it’s something you keep in mind. In the same way, the symbolic visions of Ezekiel and Revelation use figurative ways of saying that these people belong to God. He knows who His people are (2 Tim 2:19).

God’s been sealing people since the beginning of time (2 Cor 1:22, Eph 1:4, 4:30). So this isn’t a sudden end-time event. Instead, it says that when the last saint has made his final decision for God, all of His people will have been sealed. Then, all hell can break loose.⁴

John heard the number of those who were sealed (7:4). This is another one of those “I heard/I saw” patterns. John hears one set of details, and then sees something different. Let’s listen in.

And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel: from the tribe of Judah... Reuben... Gad... Asher... Naphtali... Manasseh... Simeon... Levi... Issachar... Zebulun... Joseph... Benjamin (7:4-8).

The list is symbolic, and the **twelve thousand** from each **tribe** are **God’s servants**. God’s not saying that *exactly* twelve thousand are going to be saved from each physical tribe. That idea has a couple of really big problems. First, this list of tribes is different from every other list in the Bible. That ought to alert us to its symbolic nature.

Next, we know from the Old Testament and history that the northern ten tribes were dispersed so completely that they couldn’t even be identified. God said they were so wicked that they weren’t His people any more (Hos 1:9).

Third, James addresses the church as “the twelve tribes” in his epistle (James 1:1). And of course, Paul makes it very clear that membership in Israel is determined by faith in Christ (Gal 3:29). Just like most of the rest of the book, this language is symbolic.

Name:	Meaning:
Judah	“Praise” (Israelites enter God’s spiritual Jerusalem through gates called “Praise.” See Isa 60:18.)
Reuben	“A Son” “Firstborn” (Gen 49:3; John 1:12; Rom 8:14-17, etc.)
Gad	“A Company” (Rev 7:9; 19:1, 6, etc.) – of sons, redeemed
Asher	“Happy” (John 13:17, etc.) – after
Naphtali	“Wrestling” (Gen 32:24-30, etc.) – in prayer
Manasseh	“Forgetting” (Phil 3:13; Isa 65:17) – self and the past
Simeon	“Hearing” God’s word (1 Sam 3:10: “Speak, for thy servant heareth.”)
Levi	“Joined” (John 15:1-7; Acts 2:47) – to God
Issachar	“Servants” (Rom 6:16-22, etc.)
Zebulun	“Dwelling” (Ps 91:1; Isa 33:14, etc.) – with
Joseph	“Added” (2 Pet 1:2; 5-11, etc.) – joys and special blessings
Benjamin	“Son of the right hand” “In thy presence is fullness of joy; at Thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.” (Ps 16:11; Eph 2:6) ⁵

⁴ But the saints don’t need to worry. We’ll talk about that later.

⁵ Modified slightly from Desmond Ford, *Crisis!* vol. 2 (Newcastle, CA: Desmond Ford Pub, 1982), 391.

A Great Multitude:

After this John looked and saw a great multitude which no one could count from every nation and tribe and people and tongue (7:9). This is the second half of the “I heard/I saw” pair. This uncountable mass of people is the same group that was described as the **144,000**. He **heard the number**, and **saw** the real thing. God’s saved people aren’t limited in any way by nationality, language, or heritage. They are His **bondservants**. God doesn’t care what your background is. All He wants is for you to follow Him (Rom 10:12, Gal 3:28-29, Col 3:11). And that’s the message God wants us to hear.

When the wicked cry out, “Who is able to stand?” the answer is loud and clear. In that last day, when God comes to claim His people, true Israel will stand tall, happy to see their redeemer (Gal 6:16). Because they are God’s servants, they are counted as descendants of Abraham (Rom 9:8). They come from everywhere, and it doesn’t matter whether they are “Jewish” or not.

The multitude **stands before the throne and before the Lamb**. They’ve been redeemed, and there’s no way anyone is going to keep them away from their Redeemer! It’s time for praise, and that’s what they do. Dressed in **white robes**, they hold **palm branches**. They celebrate the King, just like the Jews did when Jesus entered Jerusalem as their Messiah (John 12:12-13). They praise Him with **"Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb"** (7:10). The **angels, elders, and four living creatures** join in the chorus of praise (7:11-12).

One of the **elders** asks John if he knows who **these people clothed in white** are (7:13). John turns the question back to the elder, who answers,

"These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason, they are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple." (7:14-15)

Revelation doesn’t tell us what **the great tribulation** is. Many interpreters suggest it’s a period just before Jesus returns. But since the imagery of the fifth Seal goes all the way back to Cain and Abel, it seems more likely that it’s a term that describes all the troubles caused by Satan’s rebellion. The saints got through it by **washing their robes in the blood of the lamb**. This echoes the message to the church in Sardis (3:4-5). They are priests in **God’s temple** (Exod 19:6, 1 Pet 2:9), **serving Him day and night**.

"He who sits on the throne shall spread His tabernacle over them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; neither shall the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb in the center of the throne shall be their shepherd, and shall guide them to springs of the water of life; and God shall wipe every tear from their eyes." (7:15-17)

This is one of the most amazing promises in the Bible. But we have to walk into the picture to see it. It begins (literally) with **God will spread His booth over them**. This takes us back to the ancient Israel.

The Feast of Booths was a joyous memorial of God’s protection for the Israelites in the wilderness (Lev 23:42). They celebrated by waving the *lulav* (Lev 23:40), often made of **palm branches** (7:9). The people lived in **booths** – temporary shelters of saplings and branches – like the shelters they lived in (7:15) during the exodus from bondage in Egypt. These **booths** didn’t allow

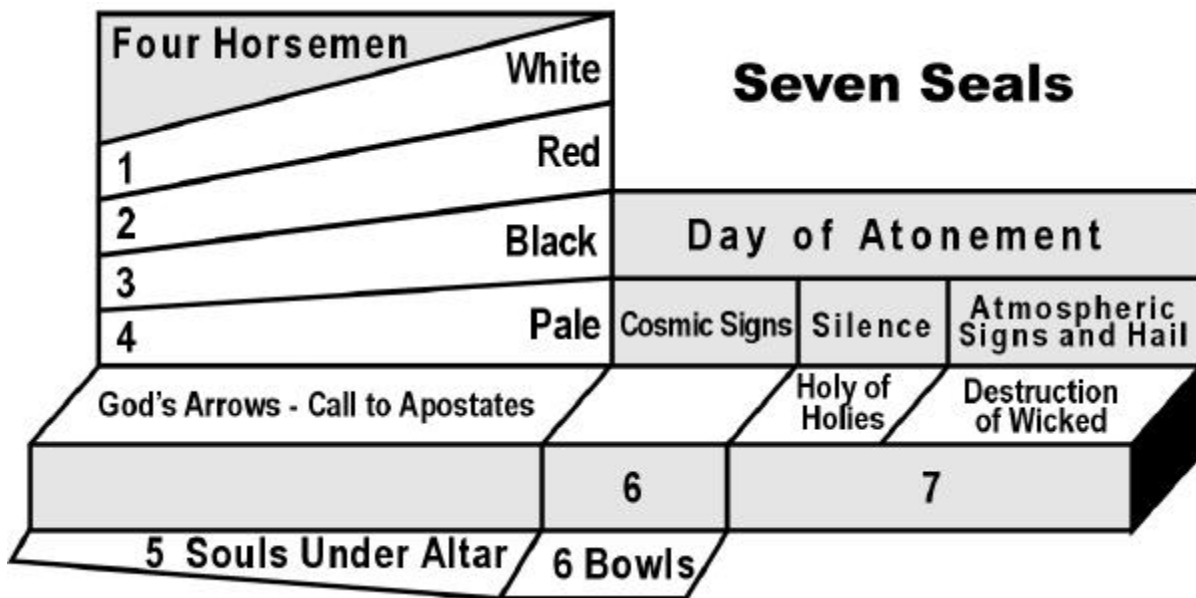
the harsh desert **sun to beat down on them** (7:16).⁶ **God led them to springs of water** (7:17, cf. Isa 12:3; Exod 17:6). They **followed** the Lord in the pillar of fire at night and the pillar of smoke in the day (Exod 13:21-22).

Right now, over 100,000 Christians are killed every year because they believe in Christ. The protection in 7:15 hasn't come yet. But when every person has made his final decision for or against Jesus, God will let Satan loose.⁷ Then God will deliver His people (Jer 30:1-8). Horrible things will happen all around them, but it won't touch them (Psa 91).

At the end of this, **God will wipe every tear from their eyes**. This marvelous promise means that God will be with His people, *in person* (Psa 42:1-5, 116:6-9, Isa 25). This will happen in the New Jerusalem (21:4), when death has been swallowed up in victory (1 Cor 15:54). Never again will any bad thing happen. Sin will be destroyed forever, and we will live with our redeemer in the **new earth** (21:5).

Recap:

The Seals tell the story of how God calls us to come to Him. The four horsemen are “God’s Arrows,” calamities that remind men that the only way out of this disaster called earth is to depend on God. The fifth Seal reminds us that faithful martyrs will be avenged in God’s time. That vengeance arrives in the seventh Seal. While the saints celebrate the Day of Atonement, the wicked suffer in the Day of the Lord.



We've left two things out in this recap. First, the sealing of the saints (chapter 7) is an interlude. It answers that question in the sixth seal, but it does something else as well. It looks at the call of grace from a slightly different angle from the Seals.

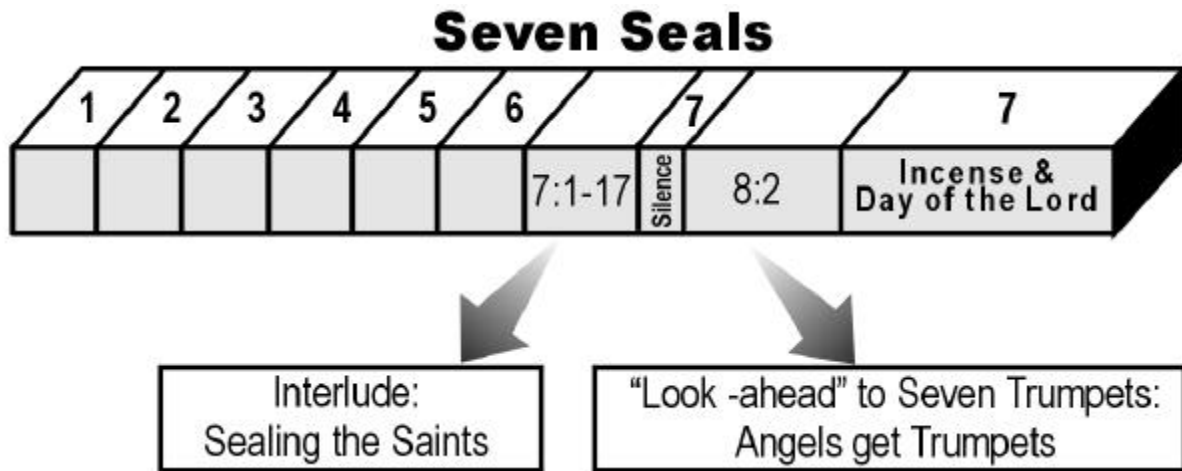
The Seals show how God nudges mankind toward repentance. Calamities remind us of our need for a Redeemer. The sealing of the saints shows us who has answered the call. They are called

⁶ The shade of the booth (*sakkath*, from the same root as *sukkot*, the word for booth or tabernacle) was a tremendous protection from the summer sun. As a result, "shade" became a symbol of divine protection, and is seen in a number of passages. Ps 17:8; 27:5; 31:20; 36:37; 57:1; 63:7; 91:1; Isa 4:6; Amos 9:11; Hos 14:7, etc.

⁷ We'll talk about this in the fifth and sixth Trumpets.

“Israel,” since they have the names of the twelve tribes. But they are really from every possible group of people. God doesn’t care where you came from; He only cares where you’re going.

The second thing we left out was 8:2. The seventh Seal started in 8:1, then skipped to 8:3-5. The verse we skipped says that **angels were given seven trumpets**. This isn’t part of the seals, but is a preview of coming attractions. Seven Trumpets are coming next. So the map of the Seals looks like this.



It probably isn’t clear why I bothered to bring this in here. Don’t worry about it. It will become obvious when we get to the seventh Trumpet and Bowl.

