Saints of the Most High Places

Daniel 7:17–28 · May 8, 2013

Who Are These Saints?

The closing portion of Daniel chapter 7 raises a question that deserves careful thought: who are 'the saints of the most high places' who receive the kingdom? In the New Testament, believers are called saints; and Daniel uses the same language here. But are these the same company?

The key is found in verse 25. The little horn — an earthly power, a man among men — is said to 'wear out the saints of the most high places.' This is happening on earth. It cannot therefore be referring to those already glorified with the Lord in heaven. These saints are still here on earth, being afflicted. They are ones who acknowledge, in testimony, the One who is in the most high places — that is, they acknowledge the authority of the Most High God in a day when the world at large does not.

> *And he shall speak words against the Most High, and shall wear out the saints of the most high places, and think to change seasons and the law, and they shall be given into his hand until a time, and times, and half a time. — Daniel 7:25*

Given that this time follows the rapture of the heavenly saints — the moment when the Lord takes His own to be with Himself — and given that these saints are still on earth, the conclusion is that these are God's earthly people, Israel, along with those among the nations who, in that time of tribulation, refuse the mark of the beast and acknowledge the God of heaven. There is no other company on earth at that point that would fit that description.

Born Again — An Earthly Thing

But how could they be called saints — holy ones — if they are not Christians in the New Testament sense? The answer is found in the Lord's words to Nicodemus in John 3. When Jesus said, 'Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God,' He was, as He Himself later told Nicodemus, speaking of earthly things. The new birth is not a distinctively New Testament truth — it is the condition of entrance into the kingdom for all people in all ages.

> *If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you of heavenly things? — John 3:12*

None of us had any active part in our first birth. It happened to us; we did not plan or petition for it. The second birth — the new birth — is equally the sovereign act of God. It comes from His will and His heart, not from man's initiative. So in the tribulation period, when men and women are born again among those who have not taken the mark, it is because God is working in them by His sovereign grace — not because they are earning a 'second chance.'

No Second Chance — The Testimony of 2 Thessalonians 2

A common notion holds that those who hear the gospel now and reject it will have another opportunity to be saved during the tribulation. This is precisely what 2 Thessalonians 2 addresses and closes off. Those who, in the day of opportunity, refused to love the truth, will be given over to strong delusion — that they should believe the lie.

> *And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie, that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness. — 2 Thessalonians 2:11–12*

The ones who will be born again among the tribulation saints, then, are those who had not yet come to an age of understanding before the rapture, or who were born after it. For them it is not a second chance, but a first. The Lord knows the difference — and we trust Him to deal with each soul with perfect justice and

perfect grace.

The point is that the word 'saint' being used of these tribulation believers should not lead us to conclude they are identical in standing to New Testament Christians. Just as Old Testament saints were genuinely the Lord's people — genuinely born again — yet distinct in their relationship to God from those who believe after the cross, so these saints of the tribulation period will have a distinct standing from those who have believed since Pentecost.

Old Testament Saints, New Testament Saints, and the Friends of the Bridegroom

This brings us to a distinction of lasting importance. The Lord said in Matthew 11:11 that 'there is not risen among the born of women a greater than John the Baptist — but he who is a little one in the kingdom of the heavens is greater than he.' Here two classes of saints are plainly before us: the one described as 'born of women' — representing the Old Testament saints — and those in the kingdom of the heavens, who represent New Testament believers. The least in the heavenly calling surpasses even the greatest of those who came before.

> *Verily I say unto you, there is not risen among the born of women a greater than John the Baptist: but he who is a little one in the kingdom of the heavens is greater than he. — Matthew 11:11*

What marks the New Testament saint as distinct is membership in the body of Christ, formed on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was given. Old Testament saints — Abraham, Moses, David, John the Baptist — were not members of that one body. They are loved of God, redeemed by the blood of Christ (for there is only one basis of redemption in all ages), and they will be in heaven. But they are not the bride; they are the friends of the bridegroom. John the Baptist himself rejoiced in that very distinction, calling himself the friend of the bridegroom who stands and hears him and rejoices greatly at his voice.

The post-rapture saints of the tribulation will occupy a position similar to the Old Testament saints — redeemed, born again, loved of God, yet not members of the body. Their portion, as stated in verse 18 of our chapter, is to receive and possess the kingdom — a glorious and substantial inheritance. But it is not the portion of the bride of Christ, whose portion is the person of the Lord Himself and the heavenly glory He has prepared for her.

The Portion of the Earthly Saints and the Sufficiency of Christ

It is worth pausing on the question of why the text says the saints possess the kingdom, rather than Christ Himself. The answer is that the whole story is not told within the bounds of Daniel 7. It is exactly this incompleteness that left Daniel's thoughts troubled and his countenance changed at the end of the chapter. The fuller picture, which only the New Testament supplies, is that the kingdom belongs first and fully to Christ — He is its King. The earthly saints possess it in association with Him, as His people, under His reign. It is only because He takes the kingdom that they can possess it with Him.

There is also a pointed application here to those who would seek to dissolve the distinction between Israel and the church by making believers a replacement for Israel, or by applying Abraham's earthly promises to the heavenly people. Both errors lower what God has given to Christians. The portion of the heavenly people is not an earthly kingdom — it is union with Christ Himself in heavenly glory. To exchange that for an earthly inheritance, however magnificent, is a profound diminishment. Verse 11 of Matthew 11 reminds us: the least in the kingdom of the heavens is greater than the greatest among the born of women.

The Four Kingdoms: A Progression Downward

Looking back across the four kingdoms, we can trace a moral progression — not upward, but downward. The first king, Nebuchadnezzar, found the idea of one omnipotent God to be a novelty. It was strange to him, though remarkable. The

second, Belshazzar, was impious — God was irrelevant, even contemptible to him. The third, Darius the Mede, allowed himself to be manipulated into attacking one of God's own prophets. And the fourth — the Roman Empire in its revived form — will be marked by open, knowing, deliberate blasphemy against the Most High: speaking great things, changing the law, setting himself up as God.

This is not a cycle. It is a descent. When God commits any matter into human hands, men bring it to ruin. The power of government was placed in man's hands at the time of Noah, when capital punishment was established. And from that beginning the current of human history has run, in God's reckoning, through these four kingdoms — each one morally worse than the last — until the Lord Himself intervenes and establishes His own.

The contrast between the statue of Daniel 2 and the beasts of Daniel 7 makes this visible. The statue shows how man thinks of his own empires — as magnificent, glorious, golden. The beasts show how God sees them — wild, rapacious, bestial. In Revelation 13, the revived Roman Empire is described as combining the characteristics of all three previous beasts: the mouth of a lion, the feet of a bear, the body of a leopard. Every quality of every fallen empire is concentrated in that final form before the Lord's return.

Only Four — Until His Kingdom Comes

There are, in God's reckoning, only four kingdoms until the Lord sets up His own. The Assyrian Empire, the Persian, the British, the French, the American — none of them count as a fifth. There are four: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome. And after Rome, in its revived form, the Lord's kingdom is established. Just as there are really only two men — Adam and Christ, whatever the billions of individual human lives may suggest — so in the purpose of God there are only four kingdoms until He who is the fifth and last and everlasting King appears.

Just as Adam, through foolishness, fell from innocence — and God sent not merely an innocent One, but the perfect One from heaven — so the succession of failing Gentile kingdoms will give way not to another earthly attempt at empire, but to the perfect kingdom of the Son of God. Of that kingdom there will be no end.

> *His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him. — Daniel 7:27*

That is where Daniel chapter 7 leaves us. The Ancient of Days seated. The Son of Man coming with the clouds. The everlasting kingdom given. The saints possessing it forever. May these things find their proper place in our hearts — not to puff us up with prophetic understanding, but to move us to worship the One to whom all of this belongs, and in whom alone all the hopes of all the ages are fulfilled.

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