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The Rewards of the Tribulation Saints*

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IN REVELATION 7:15B–17 an elder described the destiny of future Tribulation saints. Seven blessings are promised. “And He who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them. They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.” Scholars disagree on the timing and nature of these rewards.¹ Inductive inquiry suggests that the elder predicted literal rewards reserved for the eternal state. They refer to God’s overall promise that He will be with these Tribulation saints and will protect, shepherd, and comfort them.

THE ETERNAL TIMING OF THEIR REWARDS

These verses indicate that two overarching results will come to Tribulation saints. They will function like priests in heaven (v. 15a) and they will receive seven more blessings from God (vv. 15b–17). The causal use of διὰ with τοῦτο ... καί indicates that both their priestlike function and their sevenfold destiny are based on the deliverance God will give them (v. 15). When will they will receive these rewards? Will they be given immediately, in the millennium, or in the eternal state?

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¹ See G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, New Century Bible Commentary (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, 1974; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 148; Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 48; Martin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, Moffatt New Testament Commentary (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1940), 143; A. C. Gaebelein, *The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition* (New York: Our Hope, 1910), 59; Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 259–61; George Eldon Ladd, *Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 117; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 161; and J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Findley, OH: Dunham, 1958; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1964), 273, 301.

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THE CHANGE IN TIME PERIOD

The change in tenses in the middle of verse 15 from the present tense to the future tense suggests that the saints' priestlike service will occur at a time other than when their rewards will be bestowed. Their priestly service will occur in the Great Tribulation, but the rewards in verses 15b–17 are reserved for the eternal state. The elder described the saints' temple service in the present tense (εἰσιν, “are,” and λατρεύουσιν, “serve”), and their rewards are indicated by the future tense, which occurs seven times: σκηνώσει, πεινάσουσιν, διψήσουσιν, πέση, ποιμανεῖ, ὀδηγήσει, and ἐξαλείψει. This indicates that John previewed the saints' priestlike service and then used the progressive future tense to reveal what would be provided for them *after* that service period.²

This view, that a differentiation in time is made between verse 15a and verses 15b–17, is disputed. Others hold that the entire passage refers to the same time period. They argue that the change in tenses relates to different viewpoints of the author, typical in visionary literature.³ They say John was describing the future events of priestlike service in the present tense, for they appeared before his eyes in his vision. Then, they say, he moved to the future tense to continue his description of concurring events, which he did not see before him. In this view this style fits with John's previous introduction of visions in the past tense before shifting to the present (4:2–5; 5:3–5).

In addition those who say there is no time differentiation in these verses argue that John was aware of the temporal ambiguity that stems from attempting to relate time and eternity. Thus he employed his own “Semitic way of ensuring against any possible oversimplifications.”⁴ Advocates of this view say the shift to the future tense points to the completion of the process saints will go through as they enter God's presence in heaven.⁵

While these points have merit, they do not fully eliminate the view that John, led by the Spirit, could carefully point out the sequence of coming events. His change in tenses provides a natural way to clarify progression from his perspective of the Great Tribulation to the eternal state. Thus it is suggested that (a) he saw those whose robes were washed (aorist tense, showing a completed act), (b) then he saw those coming from the Great Tribulation and serving before the throne (present tenses, showing ongoing

² “The progressive future indicates that an action will be in progress in future time” (Ernest De Witt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek*, 3rd ed. [Edinburgh: Clark, 1898], 32).

³ Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, 165; and Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 334.

⁴ G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: Black, 1966; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 103.

⁵ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 444.

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activities), and (c) then he saw those who would have every tear wiped from their eyes (future tense, showing that this would take place after the Great Tribulation).

PROGRESSIVE REVELATION POINTS TO THE ETERNAL STATE

The principle of progressive revelation supports the view that the rewards predicted in 7:15b–17 will be bestowed in the eternal state (21:1–7). Progressive revelation affirms that later revelation clarifies earlier revelation.⁶ Thus it is suggested that the time of these rewards is not clarified until John’s revelation is finished and all has been recorded.

After John viewed the heavenly scene of the great multitude (7:9–17), he was shown scenes of the coming Tribulation period (chaps. 8–18), the return of Christ in judgment (chap. 19), the millennial reign of Christ (20:1–9), and the final judgments (vv. 10–15). Then subsequent to these visions he was shown the final state of the new heavens and the new earth, which included the New Jerusalem (21:1–22:5). It is in the context of this later description of the New Jerusalem that the rewards predicted in 7:15b–17 will be fulfilled. The rewards predicted in 7:15b–17 are clarified in 21:1–4 as descriptive of the holy city in the final state. In that context (v. 7), John was told that these eternal rewards are for ὁ νικῶν (“the one who overcomes”). The following table compares the two accounts.

Revelation 7:15b–17 <i>Prediction of Rewards</i>	Revelation 21:3b–4, 6b <i>Reception of Rewards</i>
“And He who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them” (7:15b).	“Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them” (21:3b).
“They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes” (7:16–17).	“And He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.... I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost” (21:4, 6b).

⁶ C. H. Dodd, *The Authority of the Bible* (London: Nisbet, 1948), 277; and Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1991; reprint, Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications Ministries, 1996), 73–74, 271–72.

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THE LITERAL ASPECTS OF THEIR REWARDS

Some writers hold that the blessings promised in 7:15b–17 are metaphors of salvation that portray what all people receive when they turn to God.⁷ They view Christ feeding them “by his word,”⁸ and God Himself being the fountain of life.⁹ This interpretation follows Origen, who taught that the saints’ reward would not be a literal, fleshly kingdom of eating and marrying. He insisted that the kingdom would be spiritual, for they will “drink from the cup of divine wisdom.”¹⁰ Yet, as will be argued, these descriptions refer to physical *as well as* spiritual blessings in the eternal state.

GOD’S PRESENCE

The first reward is that “He who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them” (v. 15b). According to 4:9–11, the One seated on the throne is God the Father. The promise in 7:15 is that He σκηνώσει ἐπὶ αὐτούς (“will live among them”). The term σκηνώσει in this context means “to dwell continuously.”¹¹ “Normally this is an idiom for taking up residence with someone.”¹² This indicates that God promised to dwell among these saints.

Contrary to this opinion the NET Bible states that “when combined with the preposition ἐπὶ [‘over’] the idea is one of extending protection or shelter.”¹³ But the NET Bible gives no examples to verify this and none is to be found in the New Testament or Septuagint.¹⁴ God promises more than protection here, for He will actually set up His place of residence, revealing His Shekinah glory, among these Tribulation saints.

⁷ For example Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Apocalypse* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1979), 53; and Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 166–67.

⁸ John Bale, *Select Works of John Bale Containing the Examinations of Lord Cobham, William Thorpe, and Anne Askewe; and the Image of Both Churches*, ed. Henry Christmas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1849; reprint, New York: Johnson, 1968), 339.

⁹ R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: Clark, 1920), 1:216.

¹⁰ Origen, *Principles* 2.11.3.

¹¹ Wilhelm Michaelis, “σκηνώω,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 377.

¹² *New English Translation/Novum Testamentum Graece New Testament* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft; Dallas: NET Bible, 2004), note on Revelation 7:15.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Σκηνώω occurs five times in the Septuagint: Genesis 13:12; Judges 5:17b (twice); 8:11b; and 3 Kings 8:12. Each refers to someone dwelling in something or somewhere.

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In the other four New Testament occurrences of σκηνόω this verb is not coupled with ἐπί.¹⁵ In each case σκηνόω refers to dwelling somewhere as a residence (John 1:14; Rev. 12:12; 13:6; 21:3). Revelation 21:3 states that God will indeed σκηνώσει μετ' αὐτῶν ("dwell with them"), indicating that God will make His primary place of residence among His saints. In light of this it appears that ἐπί with the accusative (7:15) more likely serves as a "marker of location" of God's dwelling.¹⁶ It is used this way in the Septuagint in Deuteronomy 25:5 to indicate brothers living in proximity to each other (κατοικῶσιν ἄδελφοὶ ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό). So Revelation 7:15 could refer to God living in proximity to the saints. That correlates with the later elaboration of the promise in 21:3, which states that the σκηνή of God will be among men. Σκηνή was used in the Septuagint in reference to building a "tabernacle" (σκηνή), so God could "dwell" (יָשַׁב) there among His people (Exod. 25:8–9).

Paul used ἐπισκηνόω in 2 Corinthians 12:9 to describe how the power of Christ affected him so that he could endure his thorn in the flesh. There he stated that such power dwelt on (or in) him (ἵνα ἐπισκηνώσῃ ἐπ' ἐμέ ἡ δύναμις τοῦ Χριστοῦ). The rare usage of this verb¹⁷ suggests that Paul was saying that "Christ's strength came to abide in him."¹⁸

Κατασκηνόω was commonly used in the Septuagint to translate יָשַׁב in communicating that God literally dwelt among His people (Num. 35:34; Sir. 24:8). In Leviticus 26:11–12 God said to Israel, "I will make My dwelling [יָשַׁב] among you [and] I will also walk among you." God's glory filled the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34) and then the temple (1 Kings 8:10–11).¹⁹

Later Ezekiel described the departure of God's glory from the temple (chap. 10). He also predicted that the glory would return in a time of Israel's revival (37:27). The Lord would again dwell (κατασκηνώσω) in their midst (Zech. 2:10–11). To the Jews of John's time the Shekinah as a term for God's glory meant the "immediate presence of God."²⁰ They

¹⁵ Ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν (John 1:14); ἐν αὐτοῖς σκηνοῦντες (Rev. 12:12); ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ σκηνοῦντας (13:6); σκηνώσει μετ' αὐτῶν (21:3).

¹⁶ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. Fredrick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 363.

¹⁷ The only New Testament occurrence of this verb is in 2 Corinthians 12:9. It does not appear in the Septuagint or in the writings of Philo or Josephus.

¹⁸ Michaelis, "σκηνόω," 7:387.

¹⁹ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 501.

²⁰ Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 118.

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anticipated that the Shekinah would return in the future age (v. 10). All this indicates that God will dwell in all His glory among these Tribulation saints.²¹

The fact that their reward refers to experiencing the literal presence of God is clarified in Revelation 21–22, which reveals that God’s glory will be present in the overcomers’ future eternal residence (21:11). God will also be present as its temple and its source of light (vv. 22–23). His throne will be located where His servants will serve Him (22:3), and the residents of the New Jerusalem “will see His face” (v. 4). This sacred fellowship is not unique to Tribulation saints; it is a promised reward for all believers (Matt. 5:8; 1 Cor. 13:12; 1 John 3:2).

God’s personal presence is the *first* of seven rewards for Tribulation saints. Such presence guarantees His protection.

GOD’S PROTECTION

The *second* and *third* rewards are that God will protect Tribulation saints from hunger and from thirst (Rev. 7:16). These promises are literal blessings that also figuratively depict God’s protection in general. All believers will share in these rewards in the eternal state. Promising the prospect of never hungering and thirsting again, the elder in Revelation quoted Isaiah 49:10 from the Septuagint, but he added ἔτι twice. This double use of ἔτι “strengthens the idea of ‘never again.’ ”²² The verse in Isaiah reads, “They will not hunger or thirst” (οὐ πεινάσουσιν, οὐδὲ διψήσουσιν). And Revelation 7:16 reads, “They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore” (οὐ πεινάσουσιν ἔτι οὐδὲ διψήσουσιν ἔτι).

These saints will likely suffer hunger and thirst during the Great Tribulation. Refusing to worship the beast will limit them from buying and selling, resulting in their being short of food and drink (13:17). The promise of never hungering or thirsting again is an appropriate reward for such sacrifice. Also as these saints live through the Great Tribulation, many of them will experience “collateral” damage from God’s judgments. The plagues on the waters will cause people to suffer thirst (8:10–11; 16:3–4). Thus the promise of no more thirst will be a great comfort.

Another reason literal rewards are promised is the context of the words in Isaiah. He referred to the time when Israel would be brought back to Yahweh and to their land (Isa. 49:5, 8). For their journey home, God promised to feed Israel (v. 9), keeping them from

²¹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 329. God’s presence among men in the future age is also mentioned in 1 Enoch 43:4–5. “On that day, my Elect One shall sit on the seat of glory.... I shall transform the earth and make it a blessing and cause my Elect One to dwell in her.”

²² Ibid., 330.

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hunger and thirst (v. 10). Such a literal understanding would comfort those traveling in the Middle East, where hunger and thirst were constant threats.²³

While these contexts point to literal blessings for Tribulation saints, they do not negate the fact that God promises to satisfy His saints spiritually as well. Those who hunger for righteousness will be filled with spiritual blessings (Matt. 5:6). Yet that does not seem to be the emphasis here.²⁴ The emphasis is that God will provide physical sustenance for the Tribulation saints (Rev. 7:16a).

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The *fourth* reward God promised these saints is that He will provide physical protection from the elements. “Nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat” (v. 16b). “The construction οὐδὲ μὴ followed by the aorist subjunctive πέσῃ is an example of the future of emphatic negation, emphasizing the utter impossibility of the sun’s falling upon this crowd.”²⁵ This promise adapts the literal terms of Isaiah 49:10 to the Tribulation saints’ situation. Instead of using the Septuagint term καύσων (“scorching heat”) the elder referred to πᾶν καῦμα (“any heat”).²⁶

Freedom from any heat would be a blessed contrast to the scorching pain saints might face in the later stages of the Tribulation. In the fourth bowl judgment God will bring great heat from the sun (Rev. 16:8–9). Since that plague is not directed at beast worshipers but at people in general (τοὺς ἀνθρώπους), some of the saints could be affected. Security from extreme heat and sun will be the saints’ literal situation in eternity, for in that state there will be no sun to afflict them (21:23; 22:5).

GOD’S SHEPHERDING

In Revelation 7:17a, a reason is given for the blessings that will come to Tribulation saints. It is “for [ὅτι, ‘because’] the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd.” The causal use of ὅτι suggests that the *fifth* blessing provides a reason for the previous four.²⁷ The Lamb’s shepherding will assure these saints of His provision and protection.

The Lamb who will shepherd these saints is said to be “in the center of the throne” (τὸ ἀνά μέσον τοῦ θρόνου). This identifies him with the Lamb in 5:6, who was seen as “in the midst” of God’s throne (ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ θρόνου). This Lamb was the one worthy to open

²³ Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, 260; and Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 166.

²⁴ However, Charles (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, 216), and Mounce (*The Book of Revelation*, 166) do say that the saints’ blessings will be only spiritual.

²⁵ Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary*, 502.

²⁶ The scorching heat of Isaiah 49 referred to the “burning wind of the desert, or the *sirocco*” (ibid).

²⁷ The preposition ὅτι can introduce a dependent causal clause (Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 460–61).

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the scroll (v. 9). He is also identified as the Lion from the tribe of Judah and the Root of David (v. 5). Jesus later stated that He is “the root and the descendant of David” (22:16). Thus the One who will shepherd His people is Jesus the Messiah. The scribes in Jesus’ day knew that the Messiah would shepherd Israel (Matt. 2:6). The metaphor of Jesus as shepherd is also found in John 10:11, 14; Hebrews 13:20; and 1 Peter 2:25; 5:2–4.

Interestingly in Jesus’ future ministry to Tribulation saints He is depicted in Revelation 7:17 as a *lamb* that is *shepherding*.²⁸ Being familiar with the Old Testament, John’s readers could understand that like a shepherd, God guides their ventures (Gen. 48:15), strengthens their labors (49:24), meets all their physical and spiritual needs (Ps. 23), directs their outcome (80:1), and nurtures them (Isa. 40:11). In the future He will deliver them from being prey to their enemies, and He will bring them back to Himself (Ezek. 34:22). These shepherding ministries picture what God the Son will do in rewarding His Tribulation saints throughout eternity.²⁹

This future ministry of shepherding is further clarified in Revelation 21:6–8, which states that Christ will take care of these saints in three ways. He will guide them into their eternal inheritance, the New Jerusalem; He will protect them from their enemies, who will be sent to the lake of fire; and He will provide springs of water for them to drink. Thus the shepherding figure in 7:17 points to activities Christ will perform for these saints. The Lamb will lead these saints to “living water fountains” (ζωῆς πηγὰς ὑδάτων). While some writers conclude that this water is figurative,³⁰ it is also possible that ζωῆς πηγὰς ὑδάτων refers to physical running water. In the Septuagint living water (ὑδωρ ζάω) refers to water flowing from a well (Gen. 26:19), water running over a sacrificed bird (Lev. 14:5), and rivers flowing from Jerusalem to the seas (Zech. 14:8). The early church used ὑδωρ ζάω to refer to running water in which believers were baptized (*Didache* 7.1–2). Three Old Testament prophets spoke of literal waters that will provide physical life in the last days (Ezek. 47:7–12; Joel 3:18; Zech. 14:8).

Such a plain rendering fits the usage of several terms related to ζωῆς in Revelation. Of the forty-seven occurrences of ζωῆς in the New Testament, seventeen are found in Revelation. Three refer to the water of life (7:17; 21:6; 22:17), one reference is to the crown

²⁸ Peter also referred to Jesus as both a lamb and a shepherd (1 Pet. 1:19; 2:25).

²⁹ While the other verbal uses of shepherd (ποιμαίνω) in Revelation refer to His “ruling” the nations with a rod of iron (2:27; 12:5; 19:15), the context here points to the work of a shepherd in lovingly “guiding” his sheep to nourishment (cf. Ps. 23:2).

³⁰ For example Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 442; Osborne, *Revelation*, 332; and Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of John*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1907), 105. John F. Walvoord writes, “Apparently this refers not to physical thirst but to a desire for spiritual blessings” (“Revelation,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck [Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983; reprint, Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications Ministries, 1996], 985).

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of life (2:10), and the tree of life (τοῦ ξύλου τῆς ζωῆς) is referred to four times (2:7; 22:2, 14, 19).

While “tree of life” can be used figuratively (Prov. 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4), in Revelation it could be a literal tree because the tree of life first existed as a literal tree in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:9; 3:22, 24). Since Paradise will be restored in the New Jerusalem, overcomers will be able to eat from the same literal tree of life (Rev. 2:7).³¹ In their incorruptible bodies they will have no fear of eating a fruit that makes one live forever (Gen. 3:22). Since the tree of life in Eden was a physical entity with spiritual significance, the same could be true for the springs of life. The springs could be physical, yet point to a spiritual truth related to eternal life. As the original Paradise had a literal flowing river (Gen. 2:10, 14), so the eternal one will have literal water as well (Rev. 7:17b; 22:1–2).

Another item associated with ζωῆς is the book of life, mentioned six times in Revelation (3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27). This is one of several that will be opened (20:12). Since the dead will be judged on the basis of things written in these books, it is plausible that God has a literal book with the names of His saints.

In 11:11 God’s wind refers to what breathes life (ζωῆς) into the two witnesses. Since God used physical breath to make Adam a living being (Gen. 2:7), He could again use air as a means of returning life to the two witnesses. In Revelation 16:3 ζωῆς is used of living souls, as opposed to dead ones. Thus ζωῆς is often connected with something tangible that provides physical life.

The argument that John described literal aspects of the city in Revelation 21–22 (like water) is based on the fact that he sought to clarify the state of future events (1:19). He also differentiated between literal and figurative descriptions by his use of ὅμοιος (“like”) and ὡς (“as”). He used ὅμοιος and ὡς to clarify a simile (21:11), and apparently he left the terms out at times to describe what was literal (v. 12). Using literal terms, John described in detail a city having a physical river without a physical temple.

As a reward for the Tribulation saints Christ will shepherd them to this literal running water (ζωῆς πηγὰς ὑδάτων). As Jesus demonstrated, resurrected people will be able to eat and drink physically (Luke 24:43). The *sixth* promised reward for Tribulation saints is literal eating and drinking (Rev. 7:17a; 21:6; 22:1–2). It demonstrates the spiritual truth that God will meet all their needs.

³¹ Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 280; and Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 481.

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As Tribulation saints will drink of this physical water, they will also be assured of eternal life. This is because these literal waters have spiritual significance. The phrase ζωῆς πηγὰς ὑδάτων emphasizes ζωῆς (“of life,” “living”). It is placed first for stress and it is singular, whereas πηγὰς ὑδάτων (“water fountains”) is plural. The emphasis then is on the life that these springs bring. Thus ζωῆς refers to the result of the water, namely, “life.” The point is that this literal water pictures eternal life (John 4:14). While future saints in imperishable bodies would not need literal water to sustain them, the provision of literal running water is a symbol of the spiritual life God will provide for them.

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Like eating of the tree of life, drinking from the water fountains of life will enable people to live forever. In this case ζωῆς would consistently refer to eternal life when linked with the crown, book, tree, and water fountains in Revelation. Since the crown of life is for all who love Christ, it could refer to the reward of eternal life (James 1:12). Such assurances of eternal life were previously promised to overcomers in Revelation 2:7, 10; and 3:5. The promise of never dying would be of special comfort to Tribulation saints, who will see and experience mass martyrdom.

Thus the sixth reward is a promise that Jesus will lead Tribulation saints to drink from literal water fountains that provide eternal life (7:17b). This life will have initially been given to them when they accepted Jesus, the source of life (John 4:10, 14). In eternity they will enjoy this reward by drinking with others from the water fountains of life (Rev. 22:1–2). This reward will affirm their eternal destiny, a blessing that all believers share (John 3:16).

GOD’S COMFORT

The *seventh* reward for Tribulation saints is that “God will wipe every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 7:17). This promise affirms that God will have an overarching ministry of comfort for His saints.

Will God physically use a finger or handkerchief to “wipe away” every physical tear from His saints’ eyes? No, Revelation 21 explains that God will remove tears by eliminating death.

Some Greek manuscripts add the conjunction ὅτι near the end of 21:4.³² This would indicate that a reason tears and death will be removed is “because [ὅτι] the first went

³² Scholars differ on whether ὅτι should be viewed as in the original manuscripts. External evidence is divided, and internally it is not clear whether ὅτι was dropped because copyists overlooked ὅτι by noting the preceding ἔτι, or if ὅτι was added to avoid asyndeton. It is omitted in A 1006 1611 2053 2062 2329 2377 M^A, and it is added in κ¹ 1 1854 2050 M^K a sin vg²² sy^h Ir^{lat} Aug. (Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1052; and

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away.” The “first” refers to the present state of affairs on earth, which includes the curse of sin and death (Rom. 5:12). When this present state is eliminated, these curses along with the tears they bring will be gone. Thus the passing of the old state is the means God will use to wipe tears away. The first heavens and earth will have passed away (Rev. 21:1, 4), and tears, death, mourning, crying, and pain with them.

This suggests that ἐξαλείφω (“to wipe away”) could be translated “eliminated” (Rev. 7:17). This verb is used five times in the New Testament (Acts 3:19; Col. 2:14; Rev. 3:5; 7:17; 21:4). In Acts 3:19 Peter promised that sins would be “wiped away” if people repented. In Colossians 2:14 Paul affirmed that Jesus’ death “took away” the certificate of debt, clearly a figurative use. Revelation 7:17 does not say that God will remove tears from believers’ cheeks. It says He will remove tears ἐκ (“out of”) their eyes, that is, He will remove the source of the pain that causes tears, namely, the present order, which involves death.

This view is affirmed in the possible Old Testament source for the promise in verse 17c. In Isaiah 25:8 a waw consecutive links the pledge that God “will swallow up death for all time,” with the words “and the LORD God will wipe tears away from all faces.” The order of events is significant. Before tears can be removed, the cause of sorrow must be swallowed up, which is death.³³ Revelation 21:4 also couples the fact of God’s wiping away every tear with the promise that there will no longer be death. With sin’s curse of death eliminated, grief and sorrow will no longer exist.

CONCLUSION

While each of the seven rewards contains some aspect of literal fulfillment, each one also figuratively pictures God’s pledge to be present with Tribulation saints to protect, shepherd, and comfort them in the eternal state (Rev. 7:15b–17). These rewards are also promised for today’s believers in order to encourage them to be faithful (21:1–5). Around A.D. 100, the author of 4 Ezra summarized the future literal rewards of the righteous. “It is for you that Paradise is opened, the tree of life is planted, the age to come is prepared, plenty is provided, a city is built, rest is appointed, goodness is established, and wisdom perfected beforehand. The root of evil is sealed up from you. Illness is banished from you and death is hidden. Hell has fled and corruption has been forgotten. Sorrows have

Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. [New York: United Bible Societies, 1994], 766).

³³ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah: The English Text, with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 2:196–97.

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passed away, and in the end the treasure of immortality is made manifest” (4 Ezra 8:51–54).

In view of such promises Tribulation saints will live victoriously for Christ during the terrible time when the Antichrist will persecute and kill many who will have become believers in the seven-year Tribulation. Receiving these physical rewards indicates that Tribulation saints will have resurrected bodies. The fourth article in this series will discuss the timing of their resurrection. That timing supports the view that the Tribulation saints are not part of the present-day church, the body of Christ.³⁴

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³⁴ Yates, R. S. (2006). “The Rewards of the Tribulation Saints.” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 163, 322–334.