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WHO ARE THE PEOPLE OF EZEKIEL 9:4?

You've read Ezekiel 9:4 in the past, right? You are familiar with this text. In the context of vast numbers of people being killed, God said:

And the LORD said unto him, Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and **set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof.** (Ezekiel 9:4)

So exactly who are these people who receive a mark upon their foreheads? Do you know? What is the purpose of this mark? Are they converted Christians? Just what is going on here? What would happen if these people did not receive this mark?

Let's examine this passage more closely. Some of the answers may surprise you.

THE CONTEXT

I will tell you up front that this chapter is **not** speaking about members of God's Church! And "the mark" these people receive is **not** a reference to receiving the holy spirit!

So now let's examine the context.

Let's start with what we are told in Ezekiel chapter 5. In chapter 5 God instructed Ezekiel to shave off all his hair, and to then divide his hair into three equal parts (Ezekiel 5:1). Ezekiel's hair was to represent the people of Israel. In Ezekiel 5:12 God explained that two thirds of the people would die either by famine or as a result of warfare. The remaining third was to be scattered in all directions (i.e. "into all the winds"), with warfare (i.e. the sword) eventually also destroying all of them. Then the only ones left are the "hairs" tied to Ezekiel's clothing.

It is a small percentage of that last third of hairs which was to be bound up in Ezekiel's outer clothing (Ezekiel 5:3), representing protection from all that destruction that will affect all the other hairs.

You shall also take thereof **a few in number**, and **bind them in your garment.** (Ezekiel 5:3)

The people represented by the hairs "few in number" are those who have been **selected for protection**, and they represent a very small remnant of "all the house of Israel". But not all of these people stay with Ezekiel, and so even from amongst this very small number some will still be killed. That's what verse 4 tells us.

Then **take of them** again, and cast them into the midst of the fire, and burn them in the fire; **for thereof shall a fire come forth into all the house of Israel.** (Ezekiel 5:4)

When we carefully think this scenario through, then "those hairs" cannot represent people who have God's spirit. **Why** would some of the people who have God's spirit be thrown into the fire? Are they thrown into the fire because they (supposedly) lost God's spirit? People who lose God's spirit end up in

the lake of fire, rather than just in the great tribulation. The tribulation is not about people who lose God's spirit. The great tribulation is focused on Israelites who have never been in God's Church.

Verse 4 shows that not all those **initially** protected actually stay protected throughout this whole experience. Some of those initially selected for protection will still be **rejected by God**.

Now as far as the end-time fulfillment of this prophecy is concerned, what is that "fire"? This fire is a reference to **the great tribulation** which will be inflicted on the nations of Israel. In Ezekiel 5:4 God tells us that what would happen when Jerusalem was going to be destroyed by the Babylonians (i.e. less than ten years after Ezekiel had this vision), would be a sign to "all the house of Israel" regarding what will happen to all the people of Israel in the great tribulation just before Jesus Christ's second coming.

To "bind a few hairs into his clothing" basically meant: put a small number of hairs into one of your pockets. So what happens to the "few in number" hairs that Ezekiel was supposed put in his pocket? Why, **they will be protected** during the tribulation.

Here is something we need to understand:

Ezekiel chapter 5 shows us that **a very small percentage** of the people of Israel will physically live through the tribulation and into the millennial rule of Jesus Christ.

In no way is Ezekiel 5 talking about members of God's Church! In that for us today still future situation converted Christians are going to be protected in a totally different way. God's people at that point in time will be in the place of safety, where we will be protected "from the hour of temptation which shall come upon all the world" (see Revelation 3:10). And that protection will be for the purpose of then being changed into spirit-born sons of God "in the twinkling of an eye" (1 Corinthians 15:52) at Jesus Christ's second coming.

The symbolism of the "few in number hairs" tied to Ezekiel's clothing, on the other hand, is not a reference to members of God's true Church. Members of God's true Church are not going to be "tied to" any other human being (i.e. not to Ezekiel in this account, and not to any church leader at the end time). The members of God's Church who will be protected at the place of safety will be people who will have become a part of God's Church **before** the two witnesses will have started their ministry.

Instead of being "tied to" another human servant of God, converted members of God's Church have **direct access to God the Father Himself**. That was Jesus Christ's message (see John 16:23-24, etc.). So hairs "tied to" Ezekiel's clothing are not really a suitable reference to people who have God's spirit, and who in prayer have direct access to God the Father.

However, it is a suitable picture for people who do not have God's spirit. And so there will indeed be a group of people who will be "tied to" a servant of God. But that group will not be the converted members of God's Church at the end time. It will be a different group of people.

As far as converted members of God's Church are concerned, coming to real repentance is an individual thing, and not tied to any other human being. And for physical protection at the place of safety during the tribulation nobody is going to be "tied to" any other human being. That's the point of Ezekiel 14:20 ...

Though Noah, Daniel, and Job, *were* in it, *as I live*, says the Lord GOD, **they shall deliver neither son nor daughter**; they shall *but* deliver their own souls by their righteousness. (Ezekiel 14:20)

So with the hairs tied to Ezekiel's clothing it is not speaking about protection at the place of safety.

Nobody is going to get protection at the place of safety by being "tied to" somebody else's skirt or clothing. The people who will be taken to the place of safety will be selected before the ministry of the two witnesses will start; and they will be selected **based on their own merits**, and not on whomsoever they may be connected to (i.e. speaking about adults). If they are not repentant, then people will not be taken to the place of safety at the very start of the ministry of the two witnesses.

The second part of Ezekiel chapter 14 (i.e. in the reference to Noah, Daniel and Job) is speaking about the people who will be physically protected, but **not at the place of safety**.

Noah, Daniel and Job themselves will be in the first resurrection. But the people who will be "saved" (i.e. have their physical lives spared) in the context of the hairs tied to Ezekiel's clothing, are the ones who will live physically through that difficult period of time, and then they will live on into the millennium. Those protected "hairs" are not people who will be in the first resurrection. They are people whose physical lives will be protected so that they can then be a part of the first generation at the very start of the millennium.

By way of an overview, chapter 8 of Ezekiel presents **the reason for the great tribulation**, which reason is idolatry. Chapter 9 then presents **the effect or consequence of the great tribulation**, which consequence is a massacre, primarily of the people of Israel.

Understand that Ezekiel chapter 9 is about mass killings! As verse 1 tells us:

He cried also in my ears with a loud voice, saying, Cause them that have charge over the city to draw near, **even every man with his destroying weapon in his hand**. (Ezekiel 9:1)

This is a discussion of a staggering number of people being killed during the time of the end, which includes the time for the great tribulation.

People are going to be killed in large numbers at a time when **God's people are already being protected** at the place of safety.

To get back to chapter 9, here is a distinction we need to understand.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN "A MARK" AND "A SEAL"

Let's keep in mind that the people in Ezekiel 9:4 have all received "a mark". But none of them have been "sealed". The people in Ezekiel 9:4 are **"marked" but not "sealed"**.

Now the receipt of God's spirit does **not** set a mark on people. The receipt of God's spirit has the effect of "sealing" people. Notice the following Scriptures.

Who has also sealed us, and given the earnest of the spirit in our hearts. (2 Corinthians 1:22)

In whom you also *trusted*, after that you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that you believed, **you were sealed** with that holy spirit of promise, (Ephesians 1:13)

And grieve not the holy spirit of God, **whereby you are sealed** unto the day of redemption. (Ephesians 4:30)

The Apostle Paul makes clear that when we receive God's spirit, then we become "sealed" by God's

spirit. But we have not been "marked" by God's spirit. We need to understand that **God's spirit never "marks" anybody!** To "mark" a person is simply not a purpose for God's spirit to perform. God's spirit seals people, but it never "marks" them.

Let's look at something Jesus Christ tells us in the Book of Revelation, in the context of the 5th Trumpet (or 1st Woe).

And it was commanded them that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, neither any green thing, neither any tree; but only **those men which have not the seal of God in their foreheads.** (Revelation 9:4)

Those who have "the seal of God" in their foreheads are the people just before Christ's second coming, who have God's spirit, and who are heading for the first resurrection. "Sealed" people not only have their lives protected; but they are not even "exposed to" the evils that will be going on at that time (i.e. during the last three-and-one-half years before Christ's return). They are the people who will be in the place of safety.

But the people in Ezekiel 9:4 have not been "sealed"; they have only received "a mark". That "mark" does not shield them from "exposure" to the severe persecution and destruction that will be unleashed by the first woe (i.e. Revelation 9); but **it does protect their lives from being taken** at that time.

What this all means is that in the time just before Christ's second coming there will be **two different groups** of people with whom God will be dealing in some way.

First, there will be the people who have been "sealed" by God's holy spirit. They are repentant, and they are the people who will be in the place of safety, and who will be changed into spirit-born sons of God in the twinkling of an eye, at Jesus Christ's second coming.

Second, there will be the people who receive "the mark" in Ezekiel 9:4. They are the ones whose lives will be spared in that devastating destruction upon the people of Israel. These people are not really repentant, and they do not have God's spirit. But they do have a certain attitude of deeply disagreeing with the evils in society all around them.

They have a sense of hopelessness about the world in which they live. However, that is not the same as real repentance, which is a focus on self, and on our own shortcomings before God. But these people do have a frame of mind that we could call "**a precursor**" for real repentance. With their minds they are heading in the right direction, even though they are not yet fully repentant.

Now consider the rather unique way in which these people will be protected. They are not protected in a certain geographic location. So they are not at the place of safety. **They will be protected by being "tied to" a specific servant of God.** The hairs representing those who would be protected were "tied to" Ezekiel's clothing (i.e. in his pocket). So they had to go along wherever Ezekiel would go.

They clearly have to agree with Ezekiel. And as long as they stayed with Ezekiel, they were going to be protected. But as we have seen in Ezekiel 5:4, some of those people would also leave Ezekiel, and they would then also be destroyed.

What this means for the end time fulfillment, which is still ahead of us, is that the ones who will be protected in this manner will be "**tied to**" **God's two witnesses.**

These people will not be repentant, and they will not have God's spirit. But they have responded to the warnings presented by the two witnesses, to the point of recognizing the perversion and the depravity

with which the world around them is filled. From the warnings issued to humanity by the two witnesses, this small group of people recognizes that the world is indeed being punished by God.

An example of someone with an attitude that these people will have would be "the thief on the cross" in Luke 23:39-43. He also had the attitude we could call a precursor for real repentance. It is an attitude that God can work with.

The people in this group will understand that the two witnesses are God's servants, and they try to do whatever the two witnesses are telling them to do, to be counted worthy to survive through that extremely difficult period of time, short of coming to a complete and total repentance. We can know this because a few of those that are initially tied to Ezekiel's clothing are still going to be rejected and "cast into the midst of the fire" (Ezekiel 5:4). None of the people in this whole group were repentant to start with, but those who are still cast into the fire no longer have the required attitude, which attitude they had exhibited earlier.

As a parallel, we might think of the people of Israel whom God brought out of Egypt in the days of Moses. None of those people (obviously excluding Moses) were repentant to start with. But God selected them to be brought out of Egypt. And then some of them were, in analogy, "thrown back into the fire" ... because of their rebellion, God took their lives, after initially selecting them for protection. Without trying to take this analogy too far, all the people of Israel, at the time when God destroyed Egypt with the ten plagues, were somewhat like "hairs tied to the clothing of Moses", and then some of them were thrown back into the fire.

Anyway, to get back to Ezekiel chapter 9:

Notice God's instruction to the six individuals who are responsible for killing most of humanity.

And to the others he said in mine hearing, Go ye after him through the city, and smite: let not your eye spare, neither have ye pity: **Slay utterly old and young, both maids, and little children, and women:** but come not near any man upon whom *is* the mark; and begin at my sanctuary. Then **they began at the ancient men** which *were* before the house. (Ezekiel 9:5-6)

This is a massive, horrendous and indiscriminate killing of everybody, except for the very small number of people who have this "mark". That "mark" is the only possible way for any Israelite to physically survive that slaughter.

So what is this all about? What does it mean? Here is what Ezekiel 9:4 is showing us.

In the troubles that still lie ahead of us **God is going to hand-pick every single unrepentant Israelite** who will be given the opportunity to live physically into the millennium. There is no specific number or limit in this regard ... that's why the "few in number hairs" are not counted.

If at that time more Israelites meet God's criterion of Ezekiel 9:4, then God will accept more Israelites for surviving into the millennium. And if less Israelites meet God's criterion, then less Israelites will live over into the millennium. The reason here is that this selection for receiving this "mark" is **not in any way based on some calling from God!**

It is based strictly on the attitude and frame of mind which those people themselves will have. In simple terms: "the mark" will be put on all those Israelites that God believes He will be able to work with in a positive way in the millennium. And when it becomes apparent to God that some of those selected unrepentant people have not held fast to the correct attitude they had displayed earlier, then those people will also be "cast into the fire".

God hand-picked the eight people who would survive the flood. And God will hand-pick the unrepentant Israelites who will live over into the millennium. That's what this story about the "hairs in Ezekiel's clothing" is all about. If Israelites have an attitude that looks like God will be able to lead them to a real repentance, then God will give them the opportunity to live under Jesus Christ's rule. If they don't have this correct attitude, then they will die and have to wait for the second resurrection.

No other Israelites will make it into the millennium. Only those who have this "mark" have been selected to physically survive that horrendous period. And all others will die before Jesus Christ returns.

The people with this mark will be the people who Jesus Christ will lead back into the areas where Jesus Christ will want them to live. And they will include people from every one of the tribes of Israel. While they make up a very small percentage of all Israelites alive today, they will in numeric terms very likely be several million Israelites worldwide, perhaps even similar to the number of people that God brought out of Egypt at the time of Moses?

The Israelites who came out of Egypt turned out to be too large a number for Jesus Christ alone to work with in a way, so that the majority of them would willingly accept all of God's laws and ways. But during the millennium Jesus Christ will have 144,000 resurrected sons of God assisting Him with the task of leading people to repentance. Then a million or two or three Israelites will very likely be a very manageable number for the 144,000 in the first resurrection to work with on a personal basis. And Satan will be bound during that time.

WHEN GOD MAKES A START

God the Father and Jesus Christ established the plan for creating the Family of God. And with this plan: when God starts something new, then God commonly starts in a small way. So initially God started with just two human beings: Adam and Eve. At the time of the flood God modified His plan for working with human beings. So after the flood God started the revised version of His plan of salvation with just eight human beings: Noah and his wife, and his three sons and their wives.

At Jesus Christ's return God will once again start a totally new way of working with human beings. And there will be many very dramatic changes when Jesus Christ starts to rule at the start of the millennium. And **once again God will start small**, relatively speaking. With a worldwide population today approaching eight billion people, restricting the physical people of Israel at the start of the millennium to just a few million people (i.e. those who will be the hairs bound in Ezekiel's clothing) will represent a huge cutting back.

We need to look at the enormous destruction that still lies ahead of us as a part of **the preparation for Jesus Christ's rule** to start with a small group of Israelites, small enough for the 144,000 in the first resurrection to effectively deal with on a personal basis.

Let's take note of the questions Ezekiel himself asked God. The issue is the very survival of Israel itself. It looked extremely terrible to Ezekiel, and he had a real fear that **all** the people of Israel would be destroyed. That is why Ezekiel asked God: "Ah Lord God, will You destroy **all the residue of Israel**?" (Ezekiel 9:8). And then Ezekiel asked **again**: "Ah Lord God, will You make **a full end of the remnant of Israel**?" (Ezekiel 11:13).

What do these questions sound like to you?

God's first answer wasn't enough to erase Ezekiel's concern for Israel's very survival. It looked

horrifyingly bad to Ezekiel. That's why Ezekiel asked the same question again. He wanted the assurance that at least some Israelites would survive that period of trouble, to then once again grow into a large nation.

Now let's consider one other point. The people who will be given the opportunity to physically live into the millennium will represent "**the fruit**" that will be produced by the ministry of the two witnesses.

When we listen to God's servants, and when we then respond in the way that is right before God, then God always rewards such an attitude. An attitude of acting on the warnings God has presented through His servants, is something that God always rewards.

That was true even for King Ahab, one of Israel's most evil kings. When Elijah confronted Ahab and told him the severe punishment God would bring on Ahab, like members of his family being eaten by dogs (see 1 Kings 21:21-26), then Ahab actually fasted and humbled himself before God (verse 27). Was Ahab repentant? Of course not! Ahab was scared at that point, and he did briefly humble himself; and that was enough for God to reward Ahab's fleeting humility. So God told Elijah:

Do you see how Ahab humbles himself before Me? because he humbles himself before Me, **I will not bring the evil in his days:** *but* in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house. (1 Kings 21:29)

God is consistent. Even as an unrepentant Ahab was willing to briefly humble himself before God, so there will be unrepentant Israelites during the ministry of the two witnesses, who will also humble themselves before God. And God will spare their lives, and allow them to live into the millennium, to be given the opportunity to then repent.

So to be quite clear:

More or less at the start of the ministry of the two witnesses, when some of the seven seals will be opened, and when the seven trumpets are about to be blown, God will send one angel to set a mark on all those Israelites who have been selected by God to physically survive all the fearsome events that are about to be unleashed. Those people have been selected by God because at that point in time they display a certain attitude, an attitude that God can work with. But before the ministry of the two witnesses comes to an end, some of them will still be rejected by God.

The real significance of Ezekiel 5:3-4 is that God selects each one of the physical Israelites who will be given the opportunity to live over into the millennium. Those "hairs" that Ezekiel was to preserve in his pocket are the people who receive "the mark" in Ezekiel 9:4.

Ezekiel 5:3-4 shows us **what** will happen, i.e. a very small number of Israelites will be selected for protection. And Ezekiel 9:4 shows us **the criterion** God uses for selecting those people who will be protected, i.e. they are people who have an attitude that God will be able to work with.

WHAT ABOUT THE REST OF HUMANITY?

So what about the rest of humanity? What about all the non-Israelite nations?

From what I understand, the vast majority of all people will die before Jesus Christ starts His millennial rule. The seven trumpets and the seven last plagues (Revelation 16) will result in the total destruction of all present civilizations everywhere on earth. In the process most human beings will die. As Jesus Christ said:

And except those days should be shortened, **there should no flesh be saved (alive)**: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened. (Matthew 24:22)

Jesus Christ was saying that if God did not shorten that period of time, then **human life would be totally eradicated!** Not a single human being would survive. So when God then does shorten "those days", then perhaps 1% or 2% of human lives will be preserved. Maybe it will even be 4% or 5%? But then again, it may equally well be even less than 1% who will survive. Who knows? The point is that God will intervene **just before humanity becomes extinct.**

I take this to mean that when Jesus Christ starts to rule, the total human population worldwide may perhaps be 100 million or less, of whom perhaps around two million people will be physical Israelites, the "hairs" that will be protected in Ezekiel's pocket, the individuals who have the attitude of "sighing and crying" for all the evils in our world today. And the populations of all nations will very likely be very small, when compared to present populations.

I believe that the total number of human beings, who will be granted the privilege to live over into the millennial rule of Jesus Christ, must be small. The 144,000 individuals in the first resurrection must, say within the first decade or so of the millennium, be able to interact in a personal way with every single person on earth in that first "millennium generation". And since Satan and his demons will be securely "locked away" during the millennium, the success rate for leading that first generation to a real godly repentance is likely to be very high.

All subsequent generations during the millennium can then be established on the right foundation of **a whole generation of converted parents.** Only then will be achieved something that Jesus Christ (the God of the OT) had hoped to achieve in the days of Abraham.

Notice something God had said to Abraham shortly before destroying Sodom.

For I know him, that **he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD**, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him. (Genesis 18:19)

Abraham did indeed teach his son Isaac, and so for two generations after Abraham (i.e. Isaac and Jacob) his descendants did "keep the way of the Eternal". But when it came to the next generation (i.e. Jacob's 12 sons), then the system broke down. And after that the descendants of Abraham did **not** "keep the way of the Eternal".

The point is: the hope God had expressed in Genesis 18:19 was never achieved on any significant scale, because Satan was always there as the adversary. During the millennium Satan is locked away, and the 144,000 people in the first resurrection will then work with people to achieve the result God had hoped for back at the time of Abraham.

So there is in Ezekiel 9:4 a very important message for us in our age today.

That message is that not only will God the Father personally select every single individual who will be in the first resurrection; but God the Father will also individually select all those unrepentant human beings alive today who will be given **the opportunity** to physically live into the millennial rule of Jesus Christ.

That's somewhat similar to what God told Elijah. When Elijah thought that he was the only one left who rejected idolatry, and who lived by all of God's laws, then God told Elijah:

Yet I have left *Me* **seven thousand in Israel**, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every

mouth which has not kissed him. (1 Kings 19:18)

Those 7,000 people were not necessarily converted. But they all met God's minimum requirements for God to take note of them. They all totally rejected all forms of Baal worship. They were all people who God believed He could potentially draw on, if that need should arise.

Those 7,000 were a parallel to the people in Ezekiel 9:4 who "sigh and cry" for all the abominations that are done in our evil world. They too meet God's minimum requirements for God to consider working with them.

Notice in this verse the expression "I have left Me", which is a translation of the Hebrew verb "sha'ar". The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament says the following about "sha'ar":

"sha'ar seems to be used **almost exclusively** to indicate the static action of **surviving after an elimination process**." (TWOT "sha'ar", my emphasis)

So when God said, "I have left Me 7,000 in Israel", God was saying that those 7,000 had survived "an elimination process". And that is exactly the same as we have in Ezekiel 9:4, where "those that sigh and cry for all the abominations that are being committed" will also survive an elimination process.

Let's also understand that the initial selection for the opportunity to survive an elimination process is only the first step. As God tells us in Ezekiel 5:4, some of those initially selected will still be rejected, because they for some reason lost the attitude with which they had started out.

So as far as responsible adults are concerned, Ezekiel 9:4 shows us that all the adults in Israel, if not also for all other nations, who will be given the opportunity to physically live into the millennium, are going to be hand-picked by God the Father. **They will have survived an elimination process**, where all other responsible adults were rejected. No adult Israelite will somehow be "lucky" to actually survive into the millennium. God will select the most promising candidates for real repentance, to once again start the nations of Israel in the millennium.

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