

REVELATION

Who Are the 144,000?

Revelation 7:2-3

March 30, 2024

Revelation 7 is known as an interlude. It is the response to the question posed in chapter 6:17:

"The great day of His wrath has come, and who can stand?"

And occurs prior to the 2nd Coming of Jesus hinted at in the 7th Seal of 8:1

The chapter begins with 4 angels – stationed at the 4 corners of earth, indicating that what is to come has global significance.

The angels are holding back the 4 winds – preventing them from blowing on earth, sea and trees.

In the Old Testament, winds symbolized the destructive forces God used to execute judgment on the wicked:

Jeremiah 4:11-12 – In that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem, a scorching wind from the bare heights in the wilderness in the direction of the daughter of My people -- not to winnow, and not to cleanse, a wind too strong for this -- will come at My command; now I will also pronounce judgments against them.

Jeremiah 23:19-20 – Behold, the storm of the LORD has gone forth in wrath, even a whirling tempest; it will swirl down on the head of the wicked. The anger of the LORD will not turn back until He has performed and carried out the purposes of His heart; in the last days you will clearly understand it.

Jeremiah 49:36 – And I shall bring upon Elam the four winds from the four ends of heaven, and shall scatter them to all these winds; and there will be no nation to which the outcasts of Elam will not go.

The blowing of the winds points us back to the "wrath of the Lamb" in chapter 6:16 and is a general way of describing the 7 last plagues that will be poured out on the wicked just before Jesus returns (ch. 15-16).

Another angel appears, "coming from the east and having the seal of God," and calls in a loud voice:

"Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God."

In ancient times, the fundamental meaning of sealing was a sign of ownership and, according to Paul, God recognizes those who are His and seals them with the Holy Spirit:

2 Timothy 2:19 – Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord abstain from wickedness."

Ephesians 1:13-14 – In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation -- having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory.

Ephesians 4:30 – And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

These passages show us that the sealing of God's people is not just an end-time event. Throughout history God's people have been sealed and are awaiting their reward (see Hebrews 11). However, in Revelation, the sealing takes on a special significance, as God's people experience a period of testing that will reveal whose side they are really on. The symbolic seal will distinguish those who are on God's side from those who are not.

- Those who are on God's side will receive His Seal only in their foreheads. Not only does the seal serve as the sign of ownership, it also functions as a sign of protection – covering God's people from the coming judgments of the 7 last plagues.

This imagery has its roots in the Old Testament:

Exodus 11-12 – God ordered that the Israelites put blood from the Passover lamb on the lintel and doorposts of their front door, which served as a sign of protection and covered those inside the house from the 10th plague.

Ezekiel 9:1-11 – God ordered a messenger to go through Jerusalem and place a mark on the foreheads of the faithful. The destroyer was then told to not touch those with the mark.

- Those who are not on God's side will receive their own seal – The Mark of the Beast – in their foreheads or right hands (ch. 13:16-17). They are not protected from the 7 last plagues.

“Who can stand?”

The sealed people of God.

As the vision continued John “hears” the number of those who have been sealed – 144,000.

For me personally, the identification of this group of people always created fear and anxiety.

“Who are they?”

“Are they the only ones who are saved?” – in others words, of the nearly 8 billion people on planet earth.....

“Will I be one of them?”

“Will I miss out on heaven because I'm #144,001?”

As a matter of fact, when my understanding of this group changed, my attitude toward the entire book of Revelation changed – from fear to love.

Remember that Revelation is a symbolic book, therefore, 144,000 should not be taken as a literal number.

If it's not a literal number, how do we arrive at it?

12 x 12 = 144

The number 144 is a symbol of the church built upon the foundation of the 12 tribes of Israel in the Old Testament and the 12 Apostles in the New Testament (Ephesians 2:19-20; Revelation 21:12-14).

1000 was a typical military unit.

12 x 12 x 1000 = 144,000

Once again, the foundation of this understanding is found in the Old Testament in Numbers chapter 1:1-4, 20-48:

The LORD spoke to Moses in the Tent of Meeting in the Desert of Sinai “Take a census of the whole Israelite community by their clans and families, listing every man by name, one by one. You and Aaron are to number by their divisions all the men in Israel twenty years old or more who are able to serve in the army....”

144,000 stands for God's tiny end-time spiritual army prepared for battle against the vast army of Satan NOT some group of extra special Christians. The Bible does not teach that there will be two groups of saved people.

The list of the 12 tribes of Israel in chapter 7 is also symbolic. 1st, because the literal 12 tribes of Israel no longer exist and 2nd, because the list is irregular. Judah is listed first and Dan and Ephraim are missing having been replaced by Levi and Joseph. (compare Numbers 1:19-48 with Revelation 7:5-8)

The most reasonable explanation for this is because, 1st, Jesus is the Lion of the tribe of Judah. 2nd, Dan and Ephraim were both centers of idol worship, rebellion and apostasy in ancient Israel (1 Kings 12:28-31; 2 Kings 10:29; Hosea 4:17; 8:8-12) and therefore, cannot represent God's people.

You may ask how I am comfortable with the idea that 144,000 is a symbolic rather than literal group..... Remember the literary feature of "hear" and "see"?

John describes what he hears, but when he looks, he describes something else – yet he is describing the same thing:

Revelation 1:10-13 - On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest.

Revelation 5:5-6 - Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals." Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain....

This literary feature is repeated in chapter 7. John "hears" the number 144,000, but when he turns around notice:

Revelation 7:9-17 - After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." ¹¹ All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" ¹³ Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes -- who are they, and where did they come from?" ¹⁴ I answered, "Sir, you know." And he said, "These are they who have come 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 spread his tent over them. ¹⁶ Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. ¹⁷ For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

These are God's people – the true descendants of Abraham:

Galatians 3:6-9 - Consider Abraham: "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

They remain on earth, but John describes them as already around the throne because Heaven is their real home. Just like Abraham, they are aliens and strangers on earth, looking for a better country.

They are sealed and ready to go through the great final tribulation and 7 last plagues.