

**“144,000”**

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**Scripture Text: Revelation 7:1-17**

### **Introduction**

Every day we read news headlines and hear news reports of terrible things all over our world, some close to home and many far away. Typhoons in the south Pacific, ISIS and Boko Haram, scandals in Washington, racial tension in Missouri and Oklahoma, Ebola and cancer, wars and rumors of wars, and on and on.

Where’s God in all of this? What’s He doing? Why is our world the way it is?

The answer we saw in Revelation six is because God has sent four horsemen into the world, the horseman of conflict, conquest and conquering; the horseman of the sword without peace; the horseman of famine and scarcity of necessities; and the horseman of death.

Christians won’t be exempt from all this trouble as we saw in the fifth seal the souls of martyrs being delivered up to heaven where they join the myriads of martyrs there. When their number is complete the wicked will be judged as is seen in the sixth seal.

Six of the seven seals have been opened in very quick succession. As we turn to chapter seven of Revelation we are anticipating seeing the seventh seal opened. But instead John describes two additional visions.

We often resent interruptions, but we must learn to trust the providence of God and to wait with patience for His timing and His will.

We have heard six aspects of God’s unfolding judgment on the unrighteous and there is a lingering question, what about the righteous, what happens to them during this time?

The question was asked at the end of chapter six:

**Revelation 6:17** “... for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”

The answer comes that they have been sealed by God. Remember seal six announces all the things that will happen right before the return of Christ. This interlude takes us back to explain what happens to believers during the time of the six seals.

**The First Vision: The Sealing of the sons of Israel, 7:1-8.**

“After these things ... ”

This doesn't mean what happens next in historical sequence, but what John saw next. What he saw in chapter seven doesn't happen after what he saw in chapter six.

John sees four angels standing at the four corners of the earth holding back the four winds of God's judgment until the servants of God have been sealed. The four winds are a new symbol for the destructive powers of the four horsemen.

We are reminded of God's sovereign control over all the earth, He controls the four winds of judgment. God is sovereign over all evil and all the harmful forces in our world. They don't surprise God, Satan doesn't sneak something past God.

The other good news is that God actively protects His people. Paul speaks of it in Ephesians:

**Ephesians 1:13-14** In him you also ... were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it.

We are sealed with the promised Holy Spirit when we repent of our sins and turn in faith to trust in Jesus Christ. From that moment the safety of every true believer is guaranteed. The gates of hell cannot prevail against the church of Jesus Christ or the servants of Christ.

We will not suffer one bit more than He allows and not one bit more than we can bear. What we suffer must work to our good and what we suffer will never be meaningless. He will never leave us or forsake us. Whatever happens God will save us. We are sealed. Whatever trial you are in or facing, God will be with you and deliver you through it.

*Here we encounter this well-known number of the 144,000.*

What does it mean or who does it refer to?

The Jehovah's Witnesses say this is the number of their founders and pioneers, an anointed class of their earliest followers who became JW before 1935. They say there will only be 144,000 in heaven and the rest will be on a new earth.

A good number of Christians think this number is literal and refers to an exact number of ethnic male Jews (12,000 from each tribe) who will be brought to a saving knowledge of Jesus after the rapture and they will evangelize the Gentiles before the end of the tribulation. The great multitude in heaven are their converts. A lot of the Bible prophecy teachers you hear on TV teach this.

This view believes that the church will be raptured out of the earth before the tribulation and this is how there will be more converts after the church leaves earth. Let me explain why I believe that is a wrong interpretation.

First, nowhere in Revelation is there a distinction between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Jesus has one Bride and in His Church there is neither Jew nor Greek since Christ tore down the dividing wall of hostility at the cross

The title “servants of God” in 7:3 includes Jews and Gentiles who have equal status in the church. In Revelation (1:1; 2:20; 19:2; 19:5; 22:3) servant of God refers to all the redeemed people of God.

Second, as I showed in the first seals and will show again with the seven trumpets and seven bowls, and as we saw in the seven letters, the church is not raptured out of time of tribulation, but is kept safe during the time of trial. That is the point of this sealing of the saints.

Third, in Revelation 13 we will encounter Satan sealing all his followers with a mark. Here God is sealing all His followers, not just the Jewish ones. If this is only the sealing of the Jews then the Gentile Christians in 7:9 are not sealed.

Fourth, we see this number 144,000 later in Revelation

**Revelation 14:1-5** Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. 2 And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, 3 and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been *redeemed from the earth*. 4 It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been *redeemed from mankind* as firstfruits for God and the Lamb, 5 and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.

In Revelation 14 the number is a symbolic number representing all the redeemed purchased from among men from all ages, it's a symbolic number for all the people of God.

Fifth, we have already seen around the throne the twenty four elders who symbolically represent the twelve patriarchs of the OT and the twelve apostles of the NT.

This number twelve times twelve represent the believers from each covenant age and the 1,000 represents completeness (12 times 12 times 1000 is 144,000). Perfect round numbers like this point to symbolism. This is just meant to be a very large and complete number.

The listing of exactly the same number from each tribe no matter the great difference in size among the tribes also suggests it is meant symbolically. This is a symbol, not a statistic or a numerical fact.

Seventh, this list doesn't match any list of tribes in the OT. This is not a list of a literal Israel like the lists in the OT, this is a list of the spiritual Israel.

This list adds Levi and Joseph, and leaves out Dan and Ephraim. One possible reason for dropping Dan and Ephraim may be particular sins of idolatry (see Judges 18, Isaiah 7, Hosea). Dan and Ephraim were centers of idolatry in early Israel. So this list may represent a purified Church, which Paul calls the “Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16).

There are many NT texts that refer to the church as the spiritual Israel.

**James 1:1** James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.

**I Peter 1:1** Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion.

**I Peter 2:9-10** But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

We are all Abraham's seed, and our home will be the new Jerusalem.

Finally, remember once the northern kingdom was scattered in 722 BC they lost their tribal identity and when Jerusalem fell in 70 AD all Jews lost their tribal identity with a possible exception of some from the priestly tribe of Levites.

**The Second Vision: The Great Multitude from Every Nation, 7:9-17.**

“After these things ... ”

He looked and beheld a great multitude. Who is this multitude? What is their relationship to the 144,000? Who can this white-robed crowd be but the servants of God and if servants, then they are the sealed 144,000.

Just as when James heard about a lion in chapter five but saw a lamb, so in the first vision he *heard* a number and in the second vision he *saw* a great and numberless multitude. He heard a Scriptural symbol for the sons of Israel, he saw the reality of the Church of Christ.

In this second vision John is shown something much greater, the multitude of all the redeemed from all ages standing around the throne of God. The promise made long ago to Abraham is fulfilled:

**Genesis 12:2-3** And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 ... in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

**Genesis 17:5-6** ... I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations.

**Genesis 22:17** I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore.

***Notice all he sees:***

Their number is so vast no one can count it. God's mercy is beyond reckoning. His grace exceeds all limits of generosity.

The crowd gathered is made up of individuals from every nation, tribe, people and language. One day we will stand with them all. We will get just a glimpse of heaven this weekend.

They are all arrayed in white robes, not signifying their own righteousness, but signifying redemptive grace and the righteousness of Christ imputed/given to them. His blood washes us whiter than snow. This maybe the seal, being marked with the blood of the Lamb (like at Passover on the doorposts) or with the name of the Lamb.

***Sealing in the Bible*** signifies two things: protection from tampering and certification of ownership.

That's true of Christians, we are protected by God from harm and judgment, we are owned by God, He is our God and we are His children, and we bear God's stamp of ownership and authenticity. Ultimately no harm can come to God's people in the end. We are His sealed possessions.

They are waving palm branches recalling Jesus' triumphal entry, this symbolizes victory and joyful celebration. They are celebrating the triumph of the Lion-Lamb. And it is no wonder that they celebrate. The response of the sealed saints to their salvation and protection is worship.

Do you know that you have the greatest cause for worship of all the creatures of earth?  
"Salvation belongs to our God."

Who can stand? God's people are safe amid life's trouble, sheltered in the sanctuary of His care and presence. The tabernacle and the temple in the OT were the places of God's presence, His nearness.

**Psalm 91:1-6** He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.

2 I will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."

3 For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence.

4 He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

5 You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day,

6 nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.

## Conclusion.

In Greek mythology, when Achilles was born his mother tried to make him immortal by dipping him in the river Styx. It worked except that his only place of vulnerability was his heel where the water didn't touch because that was where his mother held him while dipping him. In the great Trojan war an arrow struck Achilles in his heel and he died. Hence our referring to a weakness as an Achilles heel.

There is an invincibility and invulnerability that goes beyond anything Achilles hoped for. Those who belong to Jesus are protected, they are invincible. He will not lose a single one that belongs to Him.

This privileged position of being sealed is grace, completely undeserved and unmerited. Salvation belongs to our God. We did not choose Him, He chose us.

We are sealed to stand in the time of tribulation and trial. The power of God is greater than death itself and greater than the power of hell.

**Romans 8:35-37** Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ...37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And that is cause for exuberant worship, which is exactly what they are doing before the throne and what we can do here on earth. In the midst of the worst evil there will always be Christians singing

“Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”