

# Revelation 7:1-8

## The 144,000 sealed

(The People's Bible, Revelation, pages 83-85)

### Look

- Verse 1      “*After this*”—John is talking about the time that passed for him, not the time that elapsed since the events of the preceding verse. These 8 verses describe the angels on the Last Day gathering in the elect to heaven before the destruction of the earth and unbelievers. (Matt. 13: 39 & 49)
- “*Angels*”—There are a total of nine angels mentioned in verses 1-3. The first four angels are holding back the winds of the earth. They are clearly God’s holy angels who are keeping evil in its place until God signals the time for the final events leading up to the end of the world. There is another angel (verse 2), who has the seal of God. This angel speaks to yet another four angels, who are given power to usher in the final destruction of the world. It is difficult to say whether the second four angels are God’s holy angels who are given power to harm the earth or evil angels whom God is using as his agents. Regarding these angels, see Revelation 9:14-16.
- Verse 3      “*seal*”— Not with a visible-to-us type of seal, as we can see in Ezekiel 9:3-6 (*Scripture interprets Scripture*). The waxed seals placed on letters at this time claimed ownership and protected the contents. The seal on the elect are God’s ownership over them. Likewise, those sealed are protected by God in this life. The world won’t end until the last elect is brought into God’s kingdom.
- Verse 4      “*144,000*”—The numbers in Revelation are symbolical. The numbers are built on three basic numbers: 3, 4, and 10. Three is the number of God. Four is the number of the earth (as becomes clear in this section, where we hear about the four corners of the earth). Ten is the number of completeness. By adding 3 and 4, we get the number of the covenant, 7. By multiplying 3 and 4, we get the number of the church, 12. The 144,000 represent all believers in the Old Testament multiplied by all the believers of the New Testament multiplied by 10 to the third power, symbolizing their absolutely complete number.

Some groups understand this to be taken literally (Millennialists, many Baptists and Methodists, most "Churches of God" and Pentecostals. Also many non-Christian groups -- Jehovah's Witness, and other smaller cults). The question is -- can this be taken literally? Consider the following:

1. By the time this was written (in fact, 700 years earlier) ten of the twelve tribes were missing.
2. Joseph is listed as a tribe here, yet he died in Egypt and is not listed as a head of a tribe (Joshua 13-19).
3. Levi, here listed, was a priestly tribe and did not receive a portion of the holy land (Joshua 13:33, ff.)
4. The tribe of Dan is not listed here (Joshua 19:40-48).
5. Ephraim is also missing (Joshua 16:1-10).
6. Even Jews today cannot trace tribe descent due to intermarriage. A pure Jew today could theoretically represent as many as 12 tribes. (Strongest argument with Millennialists)
7. The original Greek sense of the word 1,000, remember, was usually simply a huge number. They did not pretend to understand hundreds of thousands, as we do. As already noted, in Revelation 12 is the number associated with the church (both the Old and New Testament church). 12 squared is 144. 1,000 is 10, the number of completeness, cubed.
8. Taken literally, this would mean that no non-Jew could be saved, a conclusion soundly contradicted throughout the Bible.

*“All the tribes of Israel”*—The list of the 12 tribes of Israel might tempt us to interpret the 144,000 as coming from the nation of Israel, perhaps the modern state of Israel, as some interpret. Yet this list in Revelation does not match any Old Testament list. Note the abnormalities of the list in verses 5-8. Also note the following passages:

- Romans 9:6-8 -- Who are the true descendants of Abraham, according to the Bible?
- Romans 2:28-29 -- What makes one a "Jew"?
- Matthew 3:8-9 -- What information does Jesus add here to the identity of a true child of Abraham?

### **Discuss**

1. What are the first four angels holding back? See Daniel 7:2 for hints on the meaning of the “winds” (verse 1).
2. What is the seal of the living God? (See Ezekiel 9:1-6. Ezekiel saw a vision of God sealing the believers in Jerusalem before God destroyed the city.)

### **Apply**

3. How can we be sure we are among the 144,000?

*The end will come, but before it does, the Lord will gather the elect into his kingdom.*

# Revelation 7:9-17

## The great multitude in white robes

(The People's Bible, Revelation, pages 86-90)

### Look

Verse 9      *"A great multitude"*—This is the same group of people as the 144,000 who were sealed on the earth. Only now they are in heaven. The first thing we notice as we view this assembly of the victorious in Christ is that the multitude was so great that no one could count it. This identification makes it clear that the 144,000 mentioned earlier as the number of the saved in Christ was a symbolic number (Scripture interprets Scripture).

*"Nation, tribe, people and language"*—In Revelation, whenever the people of the earth are referred to, they are described using a fourfold list.

The combination in this verse, which occurs in various forms throughout the book, supports the idea that the number 4 symbolizes the earth.

Verse 13 -14      One of the elders now questions John on two points: **1)** Who are these? and **2)** Where did they come from? These are two very specific questions, and John has developed enough wisdom to keep his mouth shut when he doesn't know the answer, a lesson which most of us still need to learn.

*"These are the ones who came out of the great tribulation."* Some, mainly Millennialists, teach that there will be a period at or near the end of time called the **"great tribulation"** when persecution will be greater than ever before. Unfortunately this teaching is offered in a way which is out of context with the rest of Scripture. For the believer all of life on earth is a tribulation -- we must contend with unbelievers, the devil, and our own flesh, all because of our faith. There has never been, is not, and never shall be any period in history when we must not contend -- nor will there be any period when there is not persecution. This being said, our Lord warned in Matthew 24:4-14 that persecution of believers will be more intense as we approach his return. It is a fact that Christians today are under more persecution than ever before in history. Even the freest and most tolerant of countries, the United States, has seen the growth of laws in recent years which, like many of the Roman and the old Soviet laws, persecute Christians. The verb *who came out of the Great Tribulation* is in the present tense in the Greek (These are the ones who are coming out of the great tribulation), contradicting those who teach the rapture. John sees the "coming out" of the great tribulation as a continuous and ongoing process. Every time one of the 144,000 who are sealed dies, he comes out of the great tribulations (many hardships of Acts 14:22).

### Discuss

1. What is the focus of worship throughout these verses?
2. Note the seven words of praise the angels, the living creatures, and the elders give God in verse 12. Compare these words of praise with those in 5:12. Which word is different? Can you venture a guess as to why they made this change?

### **Apply**

3. Meditate on these phrases from verses 15-17. What will each mean for you?

- “They are before the throne of God.”
- “[They] serve him day and night in his temple.”
- “[God] will spread his tent over them.”
- “Never again will they hunger.”
- “Never again will they thirst.”
- “The sun will not beat upon them.”
- “. . . nor any scorching heat.”
- “The Lamb . . . will be their shepherd.”
- “He will lead them to springs of living water.”
- “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

4. When we finally arrive in heaven, why will we praise God?

*John saw God’s people standing before the throne and the Lamb, praising God for his salvation.*