

"REVELATION MADE RELEVANT"

A verse by verse exposition of the Bible's most controversial book

Notes are Fr. Ward's personal observations with the exception of the historical background information

*****Brief Review of Revelation 6 (see last study notes!)**

III. Worship, Wrath and Witness (Revelation 4-8)

In chapter 6, God's wrath is poured out on the earth through the first six seals. The reason for this wrath is due to the false worship, idolatry, and immorality of the world's inhabitants (**Rev. 9:20-21**) and the persecution of God's people (**Rev. 6:9-11** - Seal 5). We now come to chapter 7, one of the most difficult chapters of Revelation to interpret. This chapter serves as an interlude between the sixth and seventh seals. The subject of what follows is the preservation of God's people in the midst of the outpouring of His wrath. It is their witness that testifies to the saving power of God's grace through the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. The challenge for interpreters is to figure out who exactly are the 144,000? Is it a literal number or a symbolic number? Do they represent the Jewish nation or specific Jews? Or do they represent Israel and Church separately, or both Israel and the Church together? We will address these and other questions in the following study.

C. The 144,000 & the Great Multitude (Rev. 7) – the Witness of God's People

1. The Work of the Four Angels (Rev. 7:1-4): *"After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, so that no wind would blow on the earth or on the sea or on any tree. 2And I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God; and he cried out with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, 3saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads."*

Angels are God's ministering servants for His purposes (**Heb. 1:7, 14**). They are often instruments of God's loving assistance for the elect, as well as administrators of God's judgment for those who are evil. The *"four corners of the earth"* is an ancient phrase equivalent to our phrase, the "four points of the compass." It indicates that the four angels "hover" over the entire planet. It has NOTHING to do with the belief that the earth was flat. Many of the ancient philosophers and men of science knew the earth was not flat but more sphere-like. The *"holding back of the four winds of the earth"* is a euphemism for holding back the judgments of God. For John sees another angel who comes out of the east (*"rising of the sun"*) – denotes a salvation message – (c.f. **Malachi 4:2**). This angel has *"the seal of the living God."* God's wrath is not to be poured out on the earth's inhabitants until God's bond-servants are sealed by His angels (*"we"*). The seal of the Lord is a way of highlighting His divine supernatural protection of His people from spiritual and demonic evil (**Rev. 9:4**) and even divine plagues (**Rev. 16:2**), but not necessarily harm from the Antichrist and man (**Rev. 13:7; 20:4**) or even natural disasters. Such language of God's sealing of His people relates to His saving power and protection of those who love the Lord and is used by the Apostle Paul in **2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13 & 4:30**. It is why in Holy Baptism, the priest declares, *"You are sealed in by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever!"*

2. The 144,000 (Rev. 7:5-8): - *"4And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel: 5from the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand, from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand, 6from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand, from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand, from the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand, 7from the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand, from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand, from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand, 8from the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand, from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand, from the tribe of Benjamin, twelve thousand were sealed."*

Those that are sealed number 144,000 – 12,000 each *FROM* the 12 Tribes of Israel. As noted earlier, the number and the tribes listed pose interpretive challenges for the student of God's Word. Does this mean that a literal number of Jews during the Tribulation period who come to Christ? Many who hold to the futurist interpretation believe so, and that these are converted Jews who will actually serve as evangelists testifying to the truth and love of Christ. There are some who even believe that those who are chosen will actually have the DNA of the original members of the tribes listed. On the other extreme, is the view that the 144,000 represent both Israel and the Church as the *"New Israel."* In support of the overall premise of the first view – that the 144,000 represent Jewish believers – is the fact that whenever "Israel" is used in the New Testament, it is in reference to the descendants of ancient 12 Tribes of Israel. Paul highlights this in **Romans chs. 9-11** and in other passages of his epistles. However, he does call the followers of Christ, *"Abraham's seed"* in **Gal. 3:29**, the *"true circumcision"* in **Philp. 3:3**, and the *"Israel of God"* in **Ga. 6:16**, thereby giving support to the second view. Earlier in Revelation, John also hears the Lord make the distinction between the true Jew and the false (**Rev. 2:9; 3:9**), thereby suggesting that the true Jew was the Christian believer, whether Jew or Gentile. However, it should be noted that the idea that the Church was the "new" Israel did not surface until about 160 AD.

So, is there a middle way, an interpretation that will give us a better understanding of who and what is really meant here? Recall the symbolism of the 24 elders in Revelation 4, how they represent both Israel (12 Tribes) and the Church (12 Apostles). It is clear that the Lord is not done with bringing His original covenant people, Israel, into the fold of salvation. While the "true Jew" is the person who places their faith in the One True Jewish Messiah, Jesus Christ, Paul tells of a day when Israel will return and recognize Jesus as their Messiah (**Rom. chs. 9-11**). So, too we hear the same from the Lord through the prophets of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah. The 12,000 is a select number from the tribes listed, a distinction that suggests that a minority of Jews will be sealed. In other words, the true believers among the Jewish people will be separated from the false ones. In addition, the number 12,000 is wrought with symbolism as 12 is the number of government and order for God's people, and 1000 is used as a multiple in relation to the size of the Holy City - *"The city is laid out as a square, and its length is as great as the width; and he measured the city with the rod, fifteen hundred miles (12,000 stadia); its length and width and height are equal."* (**Rev. 21:16**). Equally important, in the list of twelve tribes given to John, Judah is placed first, as a result of it being the tribe from which the Messiah came. Nowhere else in the OT is it listed first except in Numbers 2 with regards to the space arrangement of the wilderness camp. Finally, the tribes of Dan and Ephraim are omitted. Why would those two tribes be omitted? Both were corporately guilty of the sins of idolatry (**Judges 18:18-19; 1 Kings 12:29-30; Hos. 4:17**). In fact, in pre-Christian Jewish tradition and in the early Church, many believed that the Antichrist would come from the tribe of Dan! As a result, Joseph (usually listed as the tribes of his son Ephraim and Manasseh instead) and Levi (usually omitted due to their responsibility for the Temple worship), were added to the list. All of the above would suggest that this

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is a symbolic number of faithful Jews representing the corporate spiritual Jewish community who comes to Christ during the Tribulation period, rather than a literally number of genetically pre-determined individuals from the specific tribes listed. Moreover, now all of Israel can enter into the throne room of God, not just those from the tribe of Levi!

3. A Great Multitude of All Peoples (Rev. 7:9-12): *“After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; 10and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.” 11And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures; and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12saying,*

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

Now John sees an innumerable multitude of people from every ethnic group. Some believe that the 144,000 and the Great Multitude are one in the same – the first group being the spiritual “New” Israel of the Church and the second group being the actual representation of the “New” Israel. Others believe that the Great Multitude includes the first group (Jewish believers). Finally, there are those who contend that the two groups that John sees are actually two different distinct groups of believers – first, Jews, and then, Gentiles. Certainly, the 144,000 could be included in this Great Multitude. But for reasons already mentioned (see above), it seems that these two bodies of believers highlight two different aspects of the same purpose. They both represent the distinct plan of God for Israel AND the Church, and both experience the same blessing – redemption from sin and death, acknowledgment of their faithful witnesses of Christ and His Word, and the blessing of God’s eternal presence and life. So they are two different groups but reflect God’s overarching plan of salvation and are united in Christ.

In **Jn. 1:29**, John the Baptist said about Jesus *“the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the whole world,”* and its why we proclaim these profound and true words in our liturgy on Sundays. The sacrifice of the Lamb has made peoples from every nation, tribe, and tongue to be a new kingdom of priests for the LORD God! (c.f. **Rev. 1:6; 5:10**). Not one group will be left behind. The white robes, as noted in our earlier studies, denotes purity and righteousness that comes from God’s saving and redeeming work in our lives through Christ. For the Jewish people palm branches were symbols of celebration and victory. They were used during the Feast of Tabernacles (**Lev. 23:40**). They were used during other festal occasions as well (1 Macc 13:51; 2 Mac. 10:7). In addition, Jewish coins during the period from 140 BC – 70 AD, had engraved palms with the words, “the redemption of Zion” on them. Recall in **Jn. 12**, the Jews waving palm branches in their hands and proclaiming, *“Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is He who comes in the a name of the Lord.”* as Jesus rode into Jerusalem. They cry out in praise to God for what He has done through the Lamb. And the elders and angels respond to their cry/song of worship by themselves falling done before the throne in worship, themselves declaring once again a sevenfold anthem of praise to God, this time beginning with the word blessing instead of ending with the word (c.f. **Rev. 5:12-13**), blessing, and emphasizing the power and might of the Lord God to redeem and to vindicate His elect.

4. The Great Tribulation and Great Reward (Rev. 7:13-17): *“Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, “These who are clothed in the white robes, who are they, and where have they come from?” 14I said to him, “My lord, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 15“For this reason, they are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them. 16“They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; 17for 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.”*

So who exactly are these in the Great Multitude? It appears they are believers who have endured the Great Tribulation as predicted by the Lord in **Mt. 24, Lk. 21, and Mk. 13**, and prophesied by the prophet Daniel (**Dan. 12:1**) and mentioned later in **Rev. 11:7-10; 13:7; 16:6**; and possibly earlier in **Rev. 6:9-11**. The imagery of their *“robes being washed white in the blood of the Lamb”* not only highlights Christ’s sacrificial death on their behalf but also their own sacrifice of martyrdom. They serve God day and night through their never-ending worship and praise. The phrase, *“spread His tabernacle over them”* hearkens back to the shekinah glory and presence God displayed in the tabernacle and then temple. It also reflects that God’s eternal presence will be with them forever. They will no longer suffer from the effects of the curse of sin. In fact, past painful memories will even be no more (*“God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”*). The Lamb, Jesus Christ, will be at the center of the throne and He will be their Shepherd and He will give them the springs of the water of life. Such imagery reminds us of Jesus words as our *Good Shepherd* in **Jn. 10:1-8**; as our *Great Shepherd* in **Heb. 13:20**; and as our *Chief Shepherd* in **1 Pet. 5:4, c.f. 2:25**. The springs of the water of life recall to us Jesus’s words to the Samaritan woman in **Jn. 4:14**, *“but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.”* Such promises are only found in the Lord Jesus Christ and will become fully realized after His Return and the Resurrection of all the saints at the end of the present age!

LIFE APPLICATION

Our world is under a curse. It affects everything – our body, soul and spirit. It affects the planet and every living creature. This curse is further acerbated by the continued rebellion of man against the truth of God. And yet, God in His love and mercy has sent us the solution – His Son, Jesus Christ, the Lamb. The power of God is in His great love for us demonstrated in the sacrificial life and death of the prophesied Jewish Messiah. God is a God of a second and third and fourth chance! But even in the midst of this grace, there are those who not only reject the Lord but pursue and persecute and even murder those who are followers of Christ. Such evil will not go unpunished. Unless one is sealed by the Lord in His salvation they will have NO protection against the schemes and attacks of Satan and his demonic hordes. And ultimately, they will have no protection from God’s wrath and eternal judgment.

But the believer is protected. We have been sealed by the Holy Spirit. We have been sealed not only for spiritual protection but for a divine purpose. We are called to not only live for Christ through our worship but also through our witness, that others may know the hope of the resurrection to eternal life and the promised abundant life that can only be found in a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Being a member of the Body of Christ serves those purposes. We gather to worship and to be spiritually fed so that we can go out and be witnesses of the Lamb! How is that witness going for you today?