

The Seal of God and the 144,000

Revelation 7

Revelation chapter 7 is one of the most thrilling yet confusing chapters in Revelation. But it is confusing only if you approach it through the viewpoint of your own understanding. However, if you allow the bible to explain its own symbols, the chapter becomes rich in meaning and significance for an end time people. The chapter deals with the seal of God and the 144,000.

Chapter 6 closed with the question: Who shall be able to stand? That is, who shall be able to stand in the judgment and be vindicated and acquitted of Satan's charges? Chapter 7 answers that question before picking back up with the seventh seal in chapter 8.

Four Angels, Four Winds

John says,

After these things I saw four angels standing at the four comers of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, on the sea, or on any tree (Revelation 7:1).

Let's look at the symbols in this verse. What number is repeated several times in this verse? The number four. *Four* angels are standing on the *four* corners of earth, holding *four* winds. Numbers in Revelation are significant. For example, three is used to both describe the Godhead – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and the false trinity—the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet (Revelation 16:13). There is heaven's threefold blessing connected with Revelation—a blessing on those who hear, read, and keep the things written in this book. There is heaven's urgent message of three angels proclaiming God's last appeal to the whole world (Revelation 14). And this the devil's counterfeit of three unclean spirits who go to the kings of the earth to gather them to the world's last great battle (Revelation 16:13). We have already noted the importance and meaning of the number seven in Scripture. There are John's visions of the seven churches, seven seals

and seven trumpets. There are the seven lamps of fire, the seven spirits of God, the seven branched candlestick and the seventh-day Sabbath.

What is the significance of the number four?

Four symbolizes “universality” in the book of Revelation. When Revelation 7:1 talks about four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, it is emphasizing universality, or totality. There is a universal ring of angels encircling the entire globe. They restrain the forces of evil from destroying the earth. Occasionally a gust of wind may get through their fingers that God allows as a judgment upon the earth. But He does not allow the full force of satanic fury to come upon us or our world. We, too, use the phrase, “the four corners of the earth,” to indicate all the earth—north, south, east, and west.

What about the four winds that the angels are holding back so that they do not blow on the earth, the sea, or the trees? The four winds represent calamity, destruction, strife, and war threatening the earth from every direction. The prophet Daniel describes a windy seascape with four beasts rising through political struggle, war, and conflict. Jeremiah also discusses four winds of destruction that he terms as a “calamity” or “disaster” that would burst upon Judah and Elam (Jeremiah 49:32,33, 36, 37) Fierce winds are destructive. Hurricanes, and tornado’s devastate communities. Winds are a fitting symbol of the destructive forces that Satan wants to unleash upon our world.

The Seal of the Living God

John continues,

“Then I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God. And he cried with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, saying, “Do not harm the earth, the sea, or the trees till we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads. And I heard the number of those who were sealed. One hundred and forty-four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel were sealed” (verses 2-4).

This “seal of the living God” is *not* one of the seven seals closing shut the scroll that we have been studying in chapter 6. This seal belongs to God. It is His seal. A seal attests the authenticity of a document. It says this document has legal authority. It attests that the

document is genuine. If you have ever had a document notarized, you know that a notary public attaches his or her seal to the document thus guaranteeing its authenticity. Your high school or college diploma, your marriage license, the title to your automobile bear a seal that authenticates them as genuine. This seal of the living God is placed on the foreheads of His people, identifying, and authenticating them as His genuine followers. Paul writes, “Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are His’” (2 Timothy 2:19). We will be studying this seal much more in later chapters of Revelation. God’s seal stands in contrast to the mark of the beast introduced in Revelation 13. God’s seal identifies His people; the mark of the beast identifies those who follow him. God will have a seal in the last days, a sign of His creative power and authority, that will distinguish His people and identify them as His.

I might paraphrase God’s instruction to the four angels in these words, “Don’t allow the great time of tribulation to come until each one of My people has had the opportunity to accept My grace, respond to My love, and be identified by My sign or seal.”

Sealed on the Forehead vs. Sealed on the Hand

Notice where God’s seal is placed on His people. They are sealed “on their foreheads” (Revelation 7:3). When we study the counterfeit to God’s seal—the mark of the beast—we will see that it is placed on either the forehead or the hand of those who receive it (Revelation 13:15-17). Why the difference?

The forehead indicates the mind. God presents His truth to us and allows us to choose whether to accept it or reject it. Those who are sealed with God’s seal on their forehead have willingly accepted His truth and have chosen to be identified as one of His followers.

The beast, however, marks his followers either on the forehead or the hand. Those who receive the mark of the beast on the forehead are those who believe his deceptive lies. They think truth is error and error is truth. They accept his false teachings. But there are others who accept the mark of the beast, because of the pressure to conform or the consequence of refusing to bear his mark. They don’t really believe in the beast’s teachings, but they conform to avoid the consequences of not conforming. They are the ones who symbolically receive the mark of the beast in their hand – a symbol of force.

God never forces His will on us. He wants us to respond to Him freely out of love. The beast will accept even a grudging, forced commitment.

So, God tells His angels, “Don’t allow the great time of tribulation to come with the winds of strife blowing until My people have had the opportunity to settle truth in their minds and make a free choice to belong to Me.”

Of course, neither God’s seal nor the mark of the beast is literally stamped or affixed to the forehead or the hand. We are dealing here with symbols, not literal seals, or marks. They are symbols of allegiance and loyalty—either to God or to the opponent of God in the last days.

Who are the 144,000?

John says that the number of those who were sealed with the seal of the living God was 144,000. Who are these? Is this a literal number? Let’s look, first, at who make up the 144,000 and then we will consider whether this is a literal or symbolic number.

There are seven identifying characteristics of the 144,000. Let’s look at them briefly.

1. *They stand through the final crisis.* Here is the answer to the question posed at the close of chapter 6— “Who is able to stand?” The answer is that the 144,000 can stand.

2. *They stand with the Lamb (Jesus Christ) on Mount Zion (Revelation 14:1).* They are anchored in Jesus.

3. *They have the father’s name written on their foreheads (Revelation 14:1).*

4. *They sing a new song that only they can sing. It is the Song of Moses and the Lamb (Revelation 14:3; 15:3).* After the plagues were poured out on Egypt and God’s people miraculously escaped through the Red Sea, Moses and the children of Israel sang a song of deliverance (Exodus 15). In the last days of earth’s history God will deliver His people, and they will sing a mighty song of deliverance like Moses and the children of Israel.

5. *They are virgins (Revelation 14:5).* They have not committed spiritual adultery against God. They hold to the pure, true doctrines of God’s truth.

6. *They are redeemed from the earth (Revelation 14:4).* They are those who are alive when Jesus comes to meet Him with joy.

7. *They are without fault before God’s throne (Revelation 14:5).* The righteousness of Christ covers them, and their sins are forgiven.

Revelation 7:4 says that the 144,000 come from “all the tribes of the children of Israel.” Some people believe that the 144,000 are Jews who at the end of time will be converted to Christianity and go out after the tribulation to preach the gospel. Is this a valid conclusion to draw from Revelation 7?

There are several reasons to reject this idea. First, the entire book of Revelation is written in highly symbolic language, as we have seen. Also, Revelation 7:5-8 breaks down the 144,000 as 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. This would suggest a symbolic, artificially structured number. In addition, the Jewish people today no longer trace their lineage from a particular tribe listed in the Old Testament. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to identify at the end of time 12,000 Jews from each tribe of Israel.

Second, the New Testament is clear that distinctions between Jew and Gentile have been swept away in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul says,

“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:26-29).

In the New Testament all who accept Christ and become His disciples are spiritual Israelites. So, who are the 144,000? They are not converted Jews. They are spiritual Israelites. They are Christian believers who live through the final tribulation at the end-time and are redeemed from the earth. They are the redeemed who are alive on the earth when Jesus comes.

144,000—Literal or Symbolic?

What about the number, 144,000? Are we to understand this literally? Will there be exactly 144,000 individuals redeemed at the end of time who meet the seven characteristics listed above?

If so, it seems rather strange that out of a planet with an estimated population of almost 8 billion persons, only 144,000 will be redeemed from among those living when Jesus comes. As mentioned previously, symbolic language is the norm in the book of Revelation. The fact that the number is made up of 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel strongly suggests that the 144,000 is a symbolic number, not a literal one. The twelve tribes made up the totality of God's chosen people in the Old Testament. Twelve thousand from each of these twelve tribes seems to indicate completeness. It's a symbolic representation of the complete number of the redeemed that live through the final tribulation and see Jesus come. Here are totally committed to Jesus Christ in the final end-time of church history. Here is a final generation of Christian believers who live through the last crisis of this world's history and "keep the commandments of God and have the faith of Jesus." (Revelation 14:12)

Revelation chapter 7 is a call to you and to me to be faithful to Christ. It is a call to be a spiritual Israelite. It is a call to be a part of this complete number of the redeemed in the last days of earth's history.

The Great Multitude

John describes what he saw next.

After these things, I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, people, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Revelation 7:9, 10).

The 144,000 are those faithful followers of Jesus who will be living on the earth when He comes. But they are not the only ones who will be saved to live with Him forever. John sees a great multitude beyond counting, made up of people from every age and every language and ethnic group that has ever existed on earth. These have "come out of great tribulation and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the

Lamb” (verse 14). These are the saved who have died in Christ through the ages and who will be raised to life again at the Second Coming of Jesus.

Who Shall Be Able to Stand?

Notice that verse 9 says of this great multitude that they were *standing* before the throne and before the Lamb. Revelation 14:1 adds that the 144,000 are *standing* with the Lamb on Mount Zion. This answers the question raised at the close of Revelation 6—“Who shall be able to stand?”

The 144,000 shall be able to stand. The great multitude shall be able to stand. And why are they able to stand? The great multitude can stand, because they have “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” The 144,000 can stand, because they have been sealed in their foreheads with the seal of the living God. Together, the redeemed of all ages stand in the righteousness of Jesus.

Chapter 7 ends with this glorious promise:

They [all God’s redeemed people] shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (verses 16, 17).

Notice that the Lamb becomes our Shepherd! We become His sheep, and He leads us to living fountains of waters.” If we stand for God today, we will stand with Him on Mount Zion. This promise may be ours.