

## Lesson # 25 The 144,000 Evangelists

## Revelation 7:1-8

Date: November 14, 2010

<sup>1</sup>After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree. <sup>2</sup>Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, <sup>3</sup>saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads." <sup>4</sup>And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel: <sup>5</sup>12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed, 12,000 from the tribe of Reuben, 12,000 from the tribe of Gad, <sup>6</sup>12,000 from the tribe of Asher, 12,000 from the tribe of Naphtali, 12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh, <sup>7</sup>12,000 from the tribe of Simeon, 12,000 from the tribe of Levi, 12,000 from the tribe of Issachar, <sup>8</sup>12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun, 12,000 from the tribe of Joseph, 12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed.

## Introduction to Chapter 7

Chapter 6 ended with a question, "for the great day of their wrath has come and who can stand?" Our immediate response is "no one", however, some will stand and will somehow make it to the end of the tribulation period alive – both believers & unbelievers. Chapter 7 forms a sort of parenthetical report to show us how the redeemed ( those who are & who will be ) will stand in vv. 1-8, and then ① in vv. 9-17, the reward for standing – all of this coming in between the record of Seals # 6 & 7. Otherwise, we might think that the judgments falling are completely indiscriminate, and remaining alive until Jesus returns is a matter of mere luck rather than divine preservation.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> section of chapter 7 ( vv. 9-14 ) moves our attention heavenward and we next see "a great multitude that no one could number" standing before the throne in white robes and waving palm branches. John is told that these are those who are coming out of the great Tribulation. So these are people who have been saved during the Tribulation and then have died, either as martyrs or as a result of the judgments. We see that, while God will divinely protect His own, it will be as a remnant on earth, as many will die and go to heaven before the Tribulation ends, but not because they've been condemned – cf. **Rom. 8:1; 8:31-39**.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> section of chapter 7 ( vv. 15-17 ) shows the contrast for these people ( and for all the redeemed ) – serving God day & night; sheltered by His presence; no hunger, no thirst, no scorching sun or unbearable heat; with a true Shepherd who is in their presence to guide them to the living waters; and finally... no more sorrow, because God will wipe away every tear!

## I. The 4 Angels

## Rev. 7:1

“After this” is a literary device John often uses in Revelation to change scenes for us. He now draws our attention to 4 angels who are standing on the 4 corners of the earth, holding back the 4 winds of the earth.

Although differing opinions exist, the timing of this scene is, I believe, in time sequence. It comes between the 6<sup>th</sup> & 7<sup>th</sup> Seals, just as John has recorded it. Just as it forms a sort of parenthesis as explained above, to show God’s preservation of His people, it is also an interlude between the seals & what follows them, which will become more & more intense and terrifying as they are revealed.

Up to this point, there has been a chronological progression of events bringing us up to the halfway point of the 7 year Tribulation, and the sealing of the 144,000 serves to demonstrate for us God’s power to keep those whom He desires to keep during the final 3 ½ years, which is the Great Tribulation / the Great Day of His Wrath.

There are 4 angels into whose hands the authority over the natural forces of the earth has been placed. They are holding back the 4 winds as they stand at the 4 corners of the world. Now, suffice to say that John is not telling us that the earth is a square, but this is an idiomatic phrase describing compass positions.

According to Richard Mayhue<sup>i</sup>, in ancient times, it was thought that the wind directions signified either ill tidings or good news. Wind from the N-S-E-W brought good fortune, while the corners ENE – WNW etc. brought trouble. Covering all 4 corners is symbolic of total control over the entire world.

②

The mission of these 4 angels is to hold back the fury about to be unleashed as the 7<sup>th</sup> Seal, the 7 Trumpets and 7 Bowls are sent from God’s throne room. The Greek for “holding back” implies a great struggle, as if these 4 winds of fury are battling to be let go. The 4 winds are found in other prophetic passages of the OT as well; **Jer. 49:36-38; Dan. 7:2; Hos. 13:15.**

These winds are not the 4 Horsemen. Some mistakenly think that this passage is looking back on the first 4 seals as a result of misunderstanding **Zech. 6:5-8**; and a failure to deal with John’s statement in v. 1, “After this”. No – these 4 winds are about to symbolically carry the rest of the plagues and judgments to mankind. A quick comparison of Rev. 7:1b (“that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree”) & Rev. 7:3 (“do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until...”) and Rev. 8:7 (“a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up”). At Trumpet # 1, the winds are unleashed and the full fury of God’s wrath has begun. The only detail that remained undone before the full wrath could be revealed was to seal the 144,000 of Israel so the gospel could continue to go forth under unimaginably harsh conditions.

The elements – earth, sea, trees – could be taken symbolically, but taken literally, there is no difficulty posed for the text. This is solidified in the first Trumpet. It makes the most sense to take them literally as just what John says they are.

## II. The 5<sup>th</sup> Angel & the Instructions vv. 2-3

“Then I saw” – again reminds us of the fact that this vision is chronological – occurring in time sequence. John sees a fifth angel ( not Christ, not the Holy Spirit & not some OT prophet as some say ), the Greek word “*allon*” meaning another of the same kind as the last 4 angels. So this is just an angel, unnamed, and this angel rises to the sky from the east ( rising of the sun ) to bring a message to the 4 angels occupied with holding back the 4 winds.

It is probably not insignificant that this angel arises from the east, likely from the environs of Jerusalem because John was in Patmos when the vision began. The east carries great significance throughout the bible:

- Gen. 8:2 – paradise is set up in the east
- The Tabernacle was to be set up with the door facing East ( Ex. 36:33 )
- Ezek. 43:2 – God’s glory approaches the temple from the east
- Matt. 2:1 – the Magi came to worship the newborn Christ from the east
- A study of the word “east” will show a demonstrable focus on this direction throughout the Pentateuch especially, but also throughout Scripture

③

This angel is said to rise “with the seal of the Living God”, but this seal is not described. Ideas of what it is specifically run from a signet ring of God to the name of God & the Lamb – cf. **Rev. 14:1**. When the word, “mark” in **Rev. 13:6,7** is used to describe a sort of label put on the followers of the Antichrist, it means a sort of brand or tattoo possibly, so this could signify the same sort of mark ( albeit godly ) being placed on these that God is about to “seal”. Apparently, this is anticipating a visible seal, unlike our “sealing by the Holy Spirit” in Eph. 1:13 which is spiritual and thus invisible. Since those about to receive this mark are undoubtedly saved, this is certainly characteristic of spiritual sealing as well. In the Left Behind series<sup>ii</sup>, this seal of God is depicted as a grayish coloured cross on people’s foreheads which is visible only to other believers. That may or may not be an accurate depiction of what is being described. In Rev. 9:4, the demonic locusts of the 5<sup>th</sup> Trumpet Judgment are given authority to attack only those who do not have God’s seal, so to these “locusts”, the seal is visible.

This seal is “of the Living God” and carries with it absolute authority of Him who lives & reigns forever & ever. He is unique, and no other God has His authority or could ever usurp His glory.

In Ezek. 9:4 we are given a picture of the importance of this seal. ( read **Ezek. 9:1-5** ) Those given this mark are spared during the judgment of the city of Jerusalem. Those given the mark are the repentant remnant – those God will

protect – cf. v.4. The preserving effect of this sort of sealing in Rev. 7 is made plain by the context & by seeing this foreshadow in Ezekiel 9.

In v. 3, the 5<sup>th</sup> angel calls out to the other 4 now...”*Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.*” By this, we get the picture again that the first 4 angels truly have the authority not only to unleash the fury of the 4 winds, but to control what will occur when they do.

They will unleash the winds, that much is certain, but the timing of it is fully under God’s control and command. They cannot do it until “we have sealed...”. This “we” signifying that other angels accompany this fifth one to perform this task, so some angelic beings throughout Revelation assist in carrying out God’s wrath while others are on missions of mercy and protection. Some may be involved in both.

This seal is most likely some sort of pledge of security. This seal will protect those who have it from demonic onslaughts; physical death as a result of natural & cosmic plagues; human harm, etc. This seal is not indicative of their salvation, because as servants of God, they are already saved, the seal merely identifying them as such, confirming it & protecting them in whatever sense it is meant to protect them for the duration of the Tribulation. This group will appear again in **Rev. 14:1-5**, still alive as Christ’s return is imminent; however, many are convinced that some of this group will be martyred prior to Christ’s return – more of a philosophical argument than a biblical one. It assumes that, since martyrdom is the ultimate revelation of one’s salvation and passion for Christ, that to be spared the chance to die for Christ is not necessarily the best demonstration of loyalty to Christ. Ultimately, whether they live or die, the sealing is a protection against man’s worst enemy – God & His wrath. They are saved & will spend eternity in heaven. If they survive the Tribulation period, they will also populate the Millennial Kingdom. This particular sealing seems to be limited to this group of 144,000. It is uncertain whether the remainder of those who are or who become believers during the Tribulation will have a similar ( what seems to be a visible ) seal applied to them. ④

The initial protection of these people is against the 7<sup>th</sup> Seal & the Trumpet Judgments about to occur, but it almost certainly carries the connotation of divine protection through the remainder of the judgments too. That the sealing comes after the 1<sup>st</sup> 6 seals may indicate that these were saved as a result of their fear of God engendered during those plagues – a far different result than that depicted in **Rev. 6:15-17**. They were preserved for this moment even without the visible seal during that time, as many others were not. That these servants ( or better, slaves ) of God are strictly Jewish converts is made plain by what follows in vv. 4-8.

### III. The 144,000

vv. 4-8

John is the one hearing the number of the ones being sealed here – the source of the knowledge is not given. Perhaps the 5<sup>th</sup> angel is telling him, but we are not told. We are told the number and then the specifics about who these people are – 144,000 sealed – 12,000 from every tribe of Israel.

There is probably some numerical significance to the number 144,000, most likely some symbolism of fullness or completeness, however that is not to say that the number itself is symbolic. It is a literal number, and if it is not, we could not safely conclude that any number within Revelation is literal. I say that because John gives us a detailed breakdown of how this number is derived.

Much of the pressure to interpret this number as merely symbolic comes from those who would dearly love to support their own contention that these people somehow symbolize “the church”, but there is just no way to twist this passage to mean the church in such a way to divorce the meaning away from Israel. Just as God kept a remnant of 7,000 faithful in the time of King Ahab ( cf. I Kings 19:18; Rom. 11:4 ), He is reserving 144,000 for Himself here during the Great Tribulation.

We need to see that this is a special group, and it is not as if only these 144,000 are going to be saved during the Tribulation, but these specific people are being sealed so that they can evangelize the world during the final 3 ½ years without summarily being snuffed out. God has a purpose for preserving this remnant, and they even have been given gifts or special talents for evangelism. ⑤

A great deal of energy has been spent by many theologians to attempt to say that this number refers to only “spiritual” Israel, ie) the church – mostly by Amillennial and Postmillennial believers. They lay claim to the following verses to support their belief; **Matt. 19:28; Rom. 2:29; 4:11; 9:6-8; Gal. 3:29; 6:16; Phil. 3:3; James 1:1; I Pet. 1:1; 2:4,9; Rev. 1:6; 2:9; 3:9; 18:4.**

Obviously, we do not have the time to review the context and meaning of all these verses in a class setting like this one, but it is sufficient for now to say that the church is never called Israel in the NT , & never appears anywhere in the OT. The first mention of the church is in **Matt. 16:18** where Jesus says He will “build it”, not that He will add to it. In fact, the first place we are told that the church was added to & therefore was already in existence is in **Acts 2:47**. The Kingdom did not pass out of Israel’s hands forever into the hands of the church, but the church & Israel are separate entities. We have dealt with this earlier in our study of Revelation – 2:9; 3:9 – because it is a major factor in how one will interpret the book. A personal review of Romans 9-11 will be helpful for anyone uncertain of our interpretation of Israel & the church as two distinct people groups in God’s sight and plan. If the church is still on earth ( ie. did not go up in the rapture ), then what are these Jewish evangelists needed for? The church

was given the original mandate to go out and evangelize the world in Matthew 28 under Jesus' authority. Where are they?

The term 'Israel' here refers to physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac & Jacob...national Israel, not spiritual Israel. This is how the NT consistently uses the word, and only that interpretation makes sense of how John now shows the tribal divisions to show us how the exact number, 144,000, was arrived at. The number of tribes is always 12 throughout the bible ( 19 lists ), and on occasion, 1 or another tribe is left off the list, but in every list there are a total of 12 tribes.

Some argue that, as a result of the loss of all supporting tribal documentation in AD 70, that no one in Israel could ever know or prove their ancestry so how could they know what tribe they hail from? This does seem to be an insurmountable problem from a human perspective, but doesn't God know who each person is and from what tribe he or she has come from? He is the One choosing them.

In vv. 5-8, John recites the list for us...12,000 each from Judah, Reuben, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Manasseh, Simeon, Levi, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph & Benjamin<sup>iii</sup>. Note that Dan & Ephraim are missing from this list, whereas Levi is included ( often, Levi is not listed especially when the land being divided is the context for the list ). Also, Joseph & Manasseh ( Joseph's son ) are both included, although Manasseh as a son of Joseph is technically not an original head of any tribe.

Compare these 2 lists – from Gen. 35:22-26; and Rev. 7:5-8:

Genesis 35: 22-26

Rueben  
Simeon  
Levi  
Judah  
Issachar  
Zebulun  
Joseph  
Benjamin  
Dan  
Naphtali  
Gad  
Asher

Rev. 7:5-8

Judah  
Reuben  
Gad  
Asher  
Naphtali  
Manasseh  
Simeon  
Levi  
Issachar  
Zebulun  
Joseph  
Benjamin

Missing from the Revelation list – Dan & Ephraim ( Joseph's other son )

Judah is 1<sup>st</sup> on this list because it is out of Judah that Christ came, and for this list, that is of prime importance. There are some ideas as to why Dan is excluded, and these range from; it is a result of a textual corruption whereby Dan is replaced by Manasseh; or that the Antichrist was thought to arise from the tribe of Dan ( early Jewish tradition ); to Jeroboam, who set up idolatrous calf worship in Dan's territory ( I Kings 11:26; 12:28-30); to Jacob's prophecy regarding Dan in Gen. 49:17 which related him to a serpent; to its' an extinct tribe by this time;

to Dan's tribe was regularly reported in the OT of engaging in idolatrous practices ( Judges 18:2,30,31; I Kings 11:26; 12:28-30 ).

Ephraim's name is also off this list, but it is likewise a matter of opinion as to why that is. His descendants played a big role in leading the Northern tribes into idolatry; were foremost in defecting from David ( II Sam. 2:9; Isa. 7:9,17 ); and also allied with Judah's enemies ( Isa. 7:2,5; Hos. 5:3 ); or Ephraim is covered under Joseph, yet Manasseh is listed separately. Joseph's inclusion puts Ephraim in without the unpleasant history associated with his name.

Manasseh is included ( in a sense, replacing Dan ) probably because of Jacob's giving to Joseph a double blessing ( Gen. 37:3; Josh. 17:16-17 ) – and this is a tribute to the faithfulness of Manasseh.

Many of the positions and arguments regarding this list are complicated and we have only touched on some of the basic ones here, because the main point is that the 144,000 are Jews – specifically 12,000 from each of 12 tribes, which are named, and the sealing they will undergo will protect them as they go out into the world to evangelize in this last few years of world history.

This passage is far more important than many give it credit for. By interjecting this scene here, prior to the last 3 ½ years of the Tribulation, we are able to see how God superintends the care of His own children, how He will carry out His promise ( Rom. 11:26 ) to save Israel, how the gospel will go out even though the church is no longer on the scene and it does not seem as if much good news is available anymore, and how people are set apart ( made holy ) for God's purpose and as a result of His sovereignty over all things. ⑦

Next lesson – Lesson # 26

Rev. 7: 9-17 ...The Tribulation Martyrs

---

<sup>i</sup> Richard Mayhue, sermon on this passage – from his internet website.

<sup>ii</sup> Tim LaHaye & Jerry Jenkins; Tyndale

<sup>iii</sup> Robert Thomas; Revelation 1-7; Moody; p. 479 – Lists of Israel's tribes / Genesis 35:22-26; NOTE – there are 19 arrangements of these names found from Genesis to Ezekiel, and none of them match exactly with the list in Rev. 7:5-8.