

The 144,000
By grace through faith, am I one of their number?
(Part II)

Introduction

Last week and this week, we've been taking a short "detour" in our series through Acts. This detour arose from seeing Jesus' command to the disciples *not to leave Jerusalem* and the fact that it was "*necessary*" to bring the number of the disciples back to *twelve*. Here we see the continuity between the Old Covenant twelve tribes of Israel (centered in Jerusalem) and a New Covenant Israel founded on the witness of the twelve apostles and expanding outward from Jerusalem to encompass "all the nations" (Acts 1:8).

In Revelation chapter seven, John *hears* an angel telling the number of those who have been sealed, "144,000... from every tribe of the sons of Israel" (12 x 12,000; Rev. 7:2-8). But when John looks, what he *sees* is not 144,000, but "a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and [all] tribes and peoples and tongues" (Rev. 7:9). The 144,000 from every tribe of the sons of Israel represent the *complete number* of that "great multitude which no one [can] count" (and of which even the Old Covenant saints are now a part; cf. Heb. 12:22-24).

Last week, we saw that the 144,000 are **sealed**. It's *only* the 144,000 who will be preserved safely through all trials and tribulations and who will stand in the day of God's wrath. It's *only* the 144,000 who are bondslaves of God and who have the name of the Lamb and of His Father written on their forehead (all others have received the name of the beast or the number of his name). Since, as bondslaves of God, we have been sealed on our foreheads with His name and the name of the Lamb, we know that there is no one who can snatch us out of the Father's hand; there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Last week, we saw that the 144,000 are **purchased**. It's *only* the 144,000 who can learn to sing the "new song" of redemption because it's only the 144,000 who have been purchased from the earth. Since we have been "purchased with a price," even "with the precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ," we ought to "glorify God in [our] body" (1 Cor. 6:19-20 & 1 Pet. 1:18-19; cf. Rev. 5:8-9).

The 144,000 are sealed, they are purchased, and they are **undefiled**. John continues in verse 4:

I. The 144,000 are Undefiled

➤ Revelation 14:4a — These are the ones who are not defiled [*molyno*] with women...

Women are no more defiling than men are. Men and women, together, are God's good creation (Gen. 1:26-28; 2:7, 18-25). The church is pictured in the Bible as a woman, the wife of the Lamb (Rev. 21:9; cf. Eph. 5:25-27). Does God only seal men? Is it only men who are able to stand on the great day of God's wrath? Is it only men who are bondslaves of God and who have been purchased from the earth? Is it only men who can learn to sing the "new song" of the redeemed?

If the 144,000 represent the complete number of all God's elect, then why do we have the imagery 144,000 *men* who have not been defiled with women?

First of all, this is the imagery¹ of a census (Rev. 7:4-8). In the Old Testament a census always counted the males (whether as warriors or as representative heads of households²; cf. Num. 1, 26). The male imagery is simply a necessary part of the Old Testament census imagery.³ But still, what about the specific imagery of men *not defiled with women*?

A man may seduce a woman, but generally, he doesn't seduce her by his "sexual charms," and it's this imagery that we see so often in the Old Testament. This explains, in part, why in Scripture we generally have warnings to men about women (prostitutes and adulteresses) rather than warnings to women about men (men are also warned against unprovoked lust; Mat. 5:28). We think of the father in Proverbs who warns his son not to desire the beauty of the foreign woman or be captured with her eyelids (Prov. 6:24-25; cf. chapters 2, 5, 6, 7; Jer. 4:30). In Ezekiel, Israel is pictured as a harlot who seduces the surrounding nations to commit sexual immorality with her (Ezek. 16:1-43; 23:40-41; cf. Hos. 2:1-7). Here in Revelation, Jesus says to the church in Pergamum:

- Revelation 2:14 — "But I have a few things against you, that you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the *sons* of Israel, *to eat things sacrificed to idols* and to commit sexual immorality [with 'the *daughters* of Moab' (Num. 25:1, 5-6); notice the connection between sexual immorality and idolatry]."

Jesus also says to the church in Thyatira:

- Revelation 2:20-22 — "But I have this against you, that you tolerate the *woman* Jezebel [that's a symbolic name; 2 Kings 9:7, 22, 30 — "harlotries and sorceries"], who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and deceives My bondslaves so that they commit sexual immorality [with her (symbolically); were multiple men in the church committing sexual immorality with one woman named Jezebel?] *and eat things sacrificed to idols* [connection between sexual immorality and idolatry]. And I gave her time to repent, and she does not wish to repent of her sexual immorality. Behold, I will throw her on a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with *her* [symbolically through association with idols; 1 Kings 16:31; 18:4-; 19:1-2] into great tribulation, unless they repent of *her* deeds [the "men" must not defile themselves with the deeds of this "woman"].

In Revelation chapters 17 and 18 we see how the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality with "a woman"—the "great harlot." The harlot is a city full of blasphemous names and the abominations of the earth and God's people are called out of the harlot "so that [they] will not participate in *her sins* and receive of *her plagues*" (cf. Rev. 17:4-5, 18; 18:3-4, 9-19).

¹ Specifically, this is visionary imagery. John is not watching a video recording of the future (or of the present). He is being shown imagery which represents both present and future realities.

² We know that in Revelation there are more than 144,000 ethnic Jewish households that are sealed and purchased from the earth (see Part I). We also know that the criteria for entrance into the covenant community is no longer physical generation, but spiritual regeneration (see Part I.) The image of a military host (cf. Rev. 19:11-14) who have kept themselves from women (cf. Exod. 19:15; 1 Sm. 21:4) seems unlikely given the emphasis on *moral defilement*.

³ Revelation is full of familiar Old Testament imagery which is transplanted into an apocalyptic, visionary context.

God's people must not defile themselves with this "woman." In chapter 19 we see how God has "judged the great harlot who was corrupting the earth with her sexual immorality," and "avenged the blood of His bondslaves shed by *her* hand" (Rev. 19:2; cf. **Jezebel in 2 Kings 9:7**). In Revelation, there's a choice between either committing sexual immorality with this "woman" (which is spiritual adultery and partnership with the world), or else being oppressed and persecuted by this "woman" (cf. Jezebel). Here in Revelation 14, it's the nature of the imagery which requires that we see 144,000 *men* who have not been defiled with *women* (rather than *women* who have not been defiled with *men*). The 144,000 have not been defiled with the harlot. They haven't partaken of her sins.

It's important for us to see that it's *only* the 144,000 who have *not* been defiled with women ("*these are the ones* (John says) who have not been defiled with women"); *everyone else* is defiled. So here we have very vividly depicted the moral and spiritual purity of all God's people (cf. Rev. 21:8; 22:14-15) — not just of an elite group of male Jews, but of men and women "from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues." *All of us* are called to be among those who are not defiled with women. *All of us* are called to remain unstained by any idolatrous partnership with the world (cf. James 1:27). Jesus said to the church in Sardis:

- Revelation 3:4 (cf. 7:9-10) — "But you have a few names... who have not defiled [*molyno*] their garments, and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy."

Will we walk with Jesus in white because by grace alone, through faith alone, we are worthy?— Because by grace alone, through faith alone, we have not defiled our garments?

The 144,000 are sealed, they are purchased, they are undefiled, and they are **virgins**.

II. The 144,000 are Virgins

- Revelation 14:4b — These are the ones who are not defiled with women, **for [indeed] they are virgins**.

The ultimate point here is not literal celibacy. Does God seal only celibate men? Is it only celibate men who are able to stand on the great day of God's wrath? Is it only celibate men who are bondslaves of God and who have been purchased from the earth? Is it only celibate men who can learn to sing the song of the redeemed? If the 144,000 represent the complete number of all God's elect, then why this imagery of 144,000 virgins?

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus speaks of those who have "made themselves eunuchs [not literal castration, but literal celibacy] for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Mat. 19:12). Here in Revelation, then, we have the whole company of the redeemed represented under the image of those who are all eunuchs for the sake of wholehearted and undistracted devotion to the Lamb (cf. 1 Cor. 7:32-35). As John goes on to say:

- Revelation 14:4c — These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes.

Once again, it's important to see that there is no one else who follows the Lamb wherever He goes—*only* the 144,000 (“*These are the ones* who follow the Lamb wherever He goes”). The 144,000 represent the complete number of that “great multitude which no one [can] count,” who “serve [God] day and night in His sanctuary” (Rev. 7:15) and who follow the shepherd-Lamb as He “guide[s] them to springs of the water of life (Rev. 7:17).

- John 10:27 — [Jesus said,] “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they *follow* Me.”
- John 12:26 — “If anyone serves Me, he must *follow* Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also.”

So we're all meant to ask ourselves this question: Am I a member of the 144,000 virgins?—Am I a eunuch, as it were, for the sake of undistracted devotion to the Lamb?

- 1 Corinthians 7:29 — From now on [Paul says] those who have wives should be as though they had none.

Jesus said:

- Luke 14:26 — “If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother *and wife* and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My *disciple* [he cannot follow after Me].”

And one day, we will neither marry, nor be given in marriage, but as sons of God we will all be like the angels in heaven (Lk. 20:34-36).

Even though the path may lead through suffering while we're still on this earth, is it our joy as disciples (cf. Mat. 4:19; 8:22; 9:9; 16:24; 19:21; Jn. 1:43; 12:26; 21:19, 22) to follow the Lamb wherever He goes? The picture of 144,000 virgins who follow the Lamb is not intended to look weird or strange to us, or to produce in us a kind of relief that we're not among them (or even just a complacent acceptance of the fact that we're not among them). Instead, it's intended to make us *want* to be one of their number, and rejoice to know that we *are*. Because we follow Him now, one day we will stand among the 144,000 on the heavenly Mount Zion and follow the Lamb to springs of the water of life.

The 144,000 are sealed, they are purchased, they are undefiled (negative), they are virgins (positive), and they are **first fruits**. John writes:

III. The 144,000 are First Fruits

- Revelation 14:4d — These have been purchased from among men as first fruits [*aparche*] to God and to the Lamb.

Sometimes the emphasis of “first fruits” can be on the “first of more to come” (cf. Rom. 8:23; 16:5; 1 Cor. 15:20; 16:15). In this case, what comes later is equally as holy as what comes first (cf. Rom. 11:16). So if the 144,000 were the first of more to come, we would need to picture

more *just like* them: more who are not defiled with women, more who are virgins, more who are sealed and purchased from the earth, and more who can learn the song of the redeemed. We could never suppose that the 144,000 redeemed were more special or more holy than the redeemed who come later. God shows no favoritism and there are no elite groups of super-initiated people among God's children. But in any case, the number "144,000" indicates completeness, with the assumption that there are no more to be added.

Very often the emphasis of "first fruits" is not on the "first of more to come" but on that which is set apart from the rest as choice and holy (cf. Exod. 35:5-8 LXX; Ezek. 45:1; 48:8-9, 12; Num. 3:12-13). In the Old Testament, the first fruits were consecrated to God for His special use while the rest of the harvest was not.

- Exodus 23:19 (cf. Num. 15:20-21) — You shall bring the choice first fruits of your ground into the house of Yahweh your God [the rest was *not* brought into Yahweh's house].

The firstborn son was also a kind of first fruits that was devoted to God for His special use (Exod. 13:2, 13; 22:29; Num. 3:12-13).

- Exodus 22:29 — You shall not delay the offering from the fullness of your harvest and the juice of your wine vat. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to Me [no other sons were given to Yahweh].

"Firstborn" is an expression that can refer to one who is chosen by God and set over and above all the rest (with no thought of a second born).

- Exodus 4:22 — Then you shall say to Pharaoh, "Thus says Yahweh, 'Israel is My son, My **firstborn**.'"
- Colossians 1:15 (cf. Heb. 1:6) — [Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the **firstborn** of all creation.

The writer of Hebrews says that we who have believed are all part of the assembly of the *firstborn* who are enrolled in heaven (Heb. 12:23; cf. Exod. 4:22; Num. 3:12-13; Ps. 78:51; 105:36; Ezek. 44:30 LXX). So also "first fruits" can refer simply to that which is choice and holy to God (with no thought of there being more to come).

- Jeremiah 2:3 (cf. Exod. 4:22) — Israel was holy to Yahweh, the first [*arche*] of His produce. All who ate of it became guilty.

And in the New Testament:

- James 1:18 — In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits [the choice and holy portion] among His creatures.⁴

⁴ This could mean that a redeemed humanity is the first fruits of an entire redeemed creation (McCartney; cf. Rom. 8:18-21).

The 144,000, then, are not the first fruits of the redeemed with more redeemed to come. They're not purchased from among the redeemed, but, as John says, "*from among men* [*from the earth*"; cf. 14:3] as first fruits *to* God and *to* the Lamb" (dative). The emphasis is on the fact that these are the ones—as first fruits—who are devoted to God and to His use. God has purchased the 144,000 from out of the whole mass of fallen humanity so that they might be a choice and holy offering consecrated and set apart *to* Himself — so that He might bring them into His house. The emphasis here is not on our personal/practical holiness (undefiled; virgins), but on God's gracious choice to set us apart as a holy first fruits. We see again how the 144,000 represent the complete number of that "great multitude which no one [can] count... standing before the throne and before the Lamb," who "cry out with a loud voice... 'Salvation belongs to our God... and to the Lamb'" (Rev. 7:9-10). Do we love to know that we have been chosen as a choice and holy first fruits to God and to the Lamb?

The 144,000 are sealed, they are purchased, they are undefiled, they are virgins, they are first fruits, and they are **true** and **faithful**. John concludes:

IV. The 144,000 are True and Faithful

- Revelation 14:5 (cf. Zeph. 3:8-20) — And no lie was found in their mouth; they are blameless.

The point is not to make us envy something of which we can never be a part. The point is to cause us to rejoice that we *are* one of this number. In Revelation 21, we're told that "for all liars, their part be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Rev. 21:8). Later in the same chapter, were told that "no one who practices... lying shall ever come into [the new Jerusalem], but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life" (Rev. 21:27). And in Revelation 22, John says that "outside [the city]... [is] everyone who loves and practices lying" (Rev. 22:15). Therefore, it's *only* the 144,000—in whose mouth no lie is found—whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life. It's *only* the 144,000 who will be granted entrance into the city of God on Mount Zion.

To say that no lie was found in their mouth is not to say that they never once told a lie. The point is that they were not false confessors of Christ, but true. Jesus says to the church in Philadelphia:

- Revelation 3:9 (cf. 2:2; 16:13; 19:20; 20:10) — "Behold, I am giving up those of the synagogue of Satan, *those who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie*. Behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and make them know that I have loved you."

The 144,000 were not those who claimed to be Jews and were not, but lied (Rev. 3:9; cf. 2:2; 16:13; 19:20; 20:10), but—as Paul says—those who were Jews "inwardly, [whose] circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and [whose] praise is not from men, but from God" (Rom. 2:29). When they confessed Christ, no lie was found in their mouth. Instead, they confessed Christ faithfully even in the face of suffering and death (cf. Rev. 1:9; 11:7; 12:11, 17; 20:4). Therefore, "they are blameless [the life they lived was consistently whole and complete]" (cf. Ps. 32:2; Jn. 1:47; Col. 1:28; 1 Thess. 5:23; 1 Pet. 2:22; 3:10-12).

- Ephesians 1:4 (cf. 5:25, 27; Col. 1:22; Jude 24-25) — [God] chose *us* in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that *we* would be holy and blameless before Him in love...

Conclusion

By grace through faith, are you one of their number? The 144,000 have been **sealed** so as to be preserved safely through all trials and tribulations and finally to stand in the day of God's wrath. They are the **bondslaves** of God who have His name and the name of the Lamb written on their foreheads. They have been **purchased** from the earth, and now they sing that "new song" that only the redeemed can sing. They have remained **undefiled** by the sexual immoralities of the harlot; they've kept themselves unstained by any idolatrous compromise with the world. They are **virgins** for the sake of wholehearted devotion to the Lamb; they follow the Lamb wherever He goes. They have been purchased from among men as **first fruits** to God and to the Lamb—choice and holy. They have confessed Christ **faithfully** and **sincerely**, with **no lie** in their mouth; they are blameless and complete in Him (cf. Col. 1:28; 1 Thess. 5:23).

The Apostle John would have us know that we've been included in this *number*. The result of this will be peace and joy, and strength to persevere. The result of this will be confidence in our witness because we know that God will gather in the complete number of His elect; not one will be left out. The result of this will be a steadfast hope and assurance that one day we will stand with the Lamb on Mount Zion, "clothed in white robes, [with] palm branches in [our] hands; and [we will] cry out with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb...' [We] will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on [us], nor any heat; for the Lamb... will shepherd [us] and will guide [us] to springs of the water of life. And God will wipe every tear from [our] eyes" (Rev. 7:9-10, 14-17).