

144,000

Revelation 7:1–8

Studies in Revelation #16

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There are some numbers that when we hear them we have an immediate image in our minds. 1776: our national declaration of independence. 6,000,000,000: the population of the world. 11: the number of national championships Notre Dame football has won. Okay, maybe that number just sticks out to me! In Revelation 7 there is one number that evokes a response from us if we have knowledge of the book: 144,000. This number is either understood to be the number of Jewish Christians saved during the “seven-year tribulation period” by our evangelical friends or the number of those in the highest heaven by the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

What God world during the time before proclaims to us in the number 144,000 is that he will save his people from the whole Jesus’ Second Coming. As we’ll see, 144,000 is a symbolic number for all those who are saved. And salvation is described in here terms of **the seal of the living God** (v. 2). A seal identifies something. Kings would seal their letters to let the recipients know it really was his. Throughout the New Testament we are told that the Holy Spirit seals us, that we are identified as the Lord’s until the end (Eph. 1:13; 4:30; 2 Cor 1:22). Here in Revelation the seal is the name of God, the name of Jesus, and the name of New Jerusalem (3:12; 14:1).

I want you to see that in the number 144,000 God proclaims to us that he will save his people from the whole Jesus' Second Coming. We see it in two ways from our text before I will offer some application.

1. *A Truth Derived from the Structure of the Text*
2. *A Truth Derived from the Symbol of the Text*

A Truth Derived from the Structure of the Text

God will save his people from the whole world during the time before Jesus' Second Coming. We see this first *from the structure of the text*. Now hang in with me. And remember that the way the Bible is organized reveals to us the creativity of the Holy Spirit. Just like when you walk up to a house and then into it you notice that it's not just four walls and a roof, but it was designed and has been decorated, in a greater way the Word of God has been.

So back in chapter 6 we learned that all death and disease, all famine and fighting in this evil age are judgments of God upon a rebellious world. Like drops from a bucket, they are limited previews of the full outpouring of God's wrath at the coming of the Lord. And we saw that "day of judgment, day of wonders," as the hymn calls it, in 6:12-17. Already in chapter 6 we have the Second Coming, showing us that the book is not chronological. And at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ the great and awesome Day of the Lord will come with Christ as the Lion to judge the living and the dead. So seals one through six survey the whole history of the world from Christ's ascension to his Second Coming. Now skip ahead chapter 8.

That final Day is spoken of again in 8:1–6, where the seventh seal picks up at the Second Coming but also introduces us to the seven trumpets.

Why is this important? Nestled in between these descriptions of judgment and the final judgment at the Second Coming is chapter 7. The seals of chapter 6 and the trumpets of chapter 8 describe condemnation, but chapter 7 describes salvation; chapters 6 and 8 describe havoc but chapter 7 describes heaven. Chapter 7, then, is an interlude; it's a pause in this visionary narrative to give the church comfort and confidence in the Lord's work in history. Notice how John describes the cataclysm of the coming of the Lord at the end of chapter 6 now being paused for the sake of God's people here in chapter 7. John sees **four angels standing at the four corners of the earth** (v. 1), symbolizing the whole earth. And these angels are **holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree** (v. 1). Wind in the Old Testament can be used as a symbol of the judgment of God. For example Psalm 103: "As for man, for his are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more" (vv. 15–16). And as these angels are restraining the judgment of God, John sees **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, saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads"** (vv. 2–3). That's us, we'll see, saved from out of this age of tribulation!

A Truth Derived from the Symbol of the Text

We also see here that God will save his people from the whole world during the time before Jesus' Second Coming *from the symbol of the text: **And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel*** (v. 4). And then he lists off twelve thousand from twelve different tribes of Israel in verses 5–8. Contrary to the end times' scenarios popularized by the *Scofield Bible*, Hal Lindsey, and the *Left Behind* books, 144,000 is a symbol. Why? In the Old Testament Israel's tribes are listed off in various places. What's key for us to see that the 144,000 listed here being a symbol of the salvation of the church is the order of the tribes, which tribes are included, and also which tribes are excluded.

First, notice the order of the tribes listed here. Judah is moved from his typical fourth place in order to first in this list. Why? Because Jesus comes from Judah. And notice that Naphtali, Gad, and Asher, who were born to Jacob's gentile concubines Bilhah and Zilpah, and are typically listed last, are moved up here. Why? The Lord is showing us his people the New Covenant include the gentiles.

Second, notice which tribe is excluded: Dan. All the way back in Judges 17–18 we read that Dan gave into idolatry. They took Micah's household idols and his Levite priest as their own priest and set up their own worship. So why is he excluded here? It teaches us that the people of God do not engage in idolatry but are to be fully devoted to the one true God who has revealed him in Jesus Christ.

Third, notice which tribes are included: Manasseh (v. 6), Levi (v. 7), and Joseph (v. 8). This is a strange list because Joseph was a full tribe, but Ephraim and Manasseh were half tribes. To include Joseph, Levi, *and* Manasseh in the place of Dan means that there are really twelve and a half tribes numbered here; again its a symbol. Especially we see this with Levi included (v. 7). Levi had no inheritance with Israel but the Lord himself was his inheritance (Deut. 10:9–10). But now that all who belong to the Lord are “a kingdom and priests” (Ex. 19:6; 1 Peter 2:9) there is no distinction between the tribes and Levi.

Interesting stuff, isn't it? And what drives home the point that these are not saved Jews after the Rapture and during the Antichrist's tribulation period is the fact that John says the 144,000 **sons of Israel** (v. 4) are **the servants of our God** (v. 3). Throughout Revelation “servants” refers to all those who believe in Jesus Christ. So in 19:5–6 the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures call God's “servants” to praise his name and in 22:3 we are told that in the New Jerusalem “his servants shall serve him.” And how many “servants” of God are there? According to our text, 144,000; but if you keep on reading in 7:9, these 144,000 are “a multitude no man can number.”

Conclusion

What does it mean for us that God will save his people from the whole world during the time before Jesus' Second Coming?

First, God assures us here that he is the one who saves us!

Second, God offers this salvation to all.

Third, since it is God who seals and saves, this should give us confidence in telling people about Jesus.

Fourth, since sealing means belonging to the Lord, he calls us to totally devote our lives to him.

Amen.