

After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having **the seal of the living God**. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: “Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of **the servants of our God**.” Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: **144,000 from all the tribes of Israel**.

From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben 12,000, from the tribe of Gad 12,000, from the tribe of Asher 12,000, from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000, from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000, from the tribe of Simeon 12,000, from the tribe of Levi 12,000, from the tribe of Issachar 12,000, from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000, from the tribe of Joseph 12,000, from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000.

After this I looked, and there before me was **a great multitude that no one could count**, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the **Lamb**. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the **Lamb**.”

All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: “Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!”

Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes —who are they, and where did they come from?” I answered, “Sir, you know.” And he said, “These are they who have come out of **the great tribulation**; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the **Lamb**. Therefore, “they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them, nor any scorching heat. For the **Lamb** at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Before we discuss the breath-taking vision of the two groups of people in this chapter, we can be absolutely sure of one eternal truth. Here the saved are described as those who: “*Have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb*” (14). God’s way of salvation has always been the same: personal faith in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. Christ has died for all sinners, but we must appropriate or accept the salvation that he freely offers. No matter what period of history, we cannot be saved apart from Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. As Paul wrote, “*In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace*” (Ephesians 1:7). Roman slaves were freed by the payment of a ransom. The ransom paid to free sinners from sin and Satan was the death of Christ.

Revelation emphasizes that God is sovereign over history. Six of the seven seals have been opened by the Lamb. Yet John delays opening the rest of the scroll of human destiny. Instead, he explains the fate of believers during the terrible events of chapter six. John says that everyone will face a time of unprecedented evil and persecution, but God excludes his people from his judgments. Those sealed contrast the peace and security of the believers with the terror of those hiding in the rocks (6:16). God’s people would be protected from God’s punishment of an unrepentant world. John in a vision gives us a glimpse of the end of the story to assure us that, no matter how great the suffering to come, or how unlikely the final triumph of the Lamb will sometimes seem to be, the glorious fulfilment of God’s plan of salvation will become a reality. He is given assurance about the spiritual safety of the Church through all the catastrophic events of chapter six.

Revelation is a book about future endings. We best understand this vision of the future by looking at the book as a whole. However, there are different interpretations of several points in chapter seven:

1. John deliberately contrasts the second group of innumerable people with the first numbered one. Are the 144,000 in verses 4-8, and the great multitude in verses 9-17, the same or different groups?
2. Is the 144,000 a literal number, or a symbolic number, to be spiritualized?
3. Does the first group refer to a literal Israel (ethnic or physical Israel), or a spiritual Israel, a symbol for the international Church?
4. Do both groups, the 144,000 and the innumerable crowd, consist of martyrs?
5. Are Christians raptured into heaven, before divine judgment, or will Christians be on earth during God's judgments, but protected from God's wrath?
6. Does "*the great tribulation*" (14) refer only to a time of intensified evil and suffering, prior to Christ's return, or does it represent the sufferings of the Church throughout all history? Or both?

John has seen a cosmic vision in chapter 6 of unparalleled, world-wide catastrophe such as was not since the beginning of the world (cf. Matt. 24:21; Mark 13:19). Now John has a vision, a glimpse into the future, of the world's salvation, rather than its judgment. Before this terrible time, the "four winds" of destruction, symbols of the judgments of God, are held in check, by four angels, until all the faithful are sealed with the seal of God. The four winds may be another way of referring to the four horsemen of chapter six.

Daniel 7:2 explains verse one. The "four corners of the earth" points to God's sovereign rule over the entire world. The "sea" is the lawless chaos of the nations; the "trees" are the people of the earth. The "winds" of destruction represent unrest, chaos and war. The purpose of this sealing emerges in 9:4, where the 144,000 are shielded from the judgments of God. In 21:4 the name of God himself is on their foreheads. They are not exempt from the time of terror and persecution, but they are brought safely through it, as was Noah and his family in the Flood. Likewise Israel in Egypt was shielded from the 10 plagues that fell on the Egyptians. In judgment, God makes a distinction between his people and the world. God has promised to protect his people.

How will God's people be recognized and rescued when God's judgment falls? Before the final seal is broken, a new seal is introduced. It is "*the seal of the living God*" (2). God's "servants" are to be sealed before any destruction on earth (3). The word "servants" or "bondslaves" stresses utter devotion. Believers have a seal of royalty from God the King: "*Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession.*" (Eph. 1:13-14). The invisible seal speaks of identity, ownership and protection. In ancient times, most could not read, so a seal was attached to a document to guarantee its genuineness. It was attached to goods in transit to indicate ownership and ensure protection. The owner of a vineyard would seal jars of wine to show that they came from his vineyard and with his guarantee. The seal shows how valuable God's people are to him; it is a sign of spiritual and eternal protection. God is faithful: "*The Lord knows those who are his*" (2 Tim. 2:19).

The sealing recalls all the other acts of sealing which God's people have experienced: the blood on the doorpost before the Passover (Exodus 12:7); in Ezekiel, God marks the righteous remnant to protect them from his judgments (9:4). God's people will come through safely in the end, however battered they may be. The Church is spiritually indestructible: "*I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it*" (Matt. 16:18). This seal of God is counterfeited by Satan in 13:16; a seal known as "*the mark of the beast*". These two marks separate people into two distinct categories—those owned by God and those owned by Satan.

Is the number 144,000 a literal or a symbolic number? John's list of Israel's tribes is unlike any other in the Bible. There are some anomalies. First, these are not the twelve actual tribes of Israel that inherited the land of Canaan. Levi is included when it had no inheritance of land with the other tribes. Judah comes first, not Reuben, because the Messiah came from the tribe of Judah. Ephraim is also not included, but is included indirectly, because Joseph was the father of both Ephraim and Manasseh. This means Manasseh is included twice. Much is made of Dan's exclusion. Tradition says that the Antichrist comes from Dan. Perhaps 'Dan' was misread by an ancient copyist for 'Man', which was misunderstood as an abbreviation for Manasseh.

If the Israelites in verses 4-8 are literal, do they describe the salvation of Israel, before the return of Christ, as in Romans 11? However, some believe the numbers refer only to the faithful remnant of OT saints. Others take the 144,000 as a literal number of Jewish believers who are missionaries to the nations, during the end-

time tribulation, while the raptured Church rejoices in heaven. Some like the Jehovah Witnesses put themselves in a special box, and believe only 144,000 will be ever saved, i.e. themselves.

Here is a possible explanation. Numbers in Revelation are best understood symbolically. The number 12 emphasizes the **continuity** of the NT Church, and Israel the OT people of God. John writes of the new Jerusalem as the spiritual home of all believers: *“It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb”* (Revelation 21:12-14). The 144,000 represent all those destined for the new Jerusalem.

“Twelve” symbolises both Israel (its 12 tribes) and the Church (its 12 disciples), while 144,000 speaks of their completeness (12 x 12 x 1000). The 144,000 of verse 4 may represent the entire people of God, both OT and NT. The number 3 is God’s number, representing the trinity; 4 stands for creation, or the world; 3 x 4 = 12, which means the Church, God’s people, through whom God is at work in the world; 12 x 12 = 144, all the people of God; 10 means completeness; 10 x 10 x 10 = 1000, total completeness; 12 x 12 x 10 x 10 x 10 = 144,000, the entire people of God in all their completeness. The symbolic number 144,000 may describe the faithful remnant of both the OT and the NT, that is, believing Israel, or the entire spiritual Israel.

Most likely, this listing of the twelve tribes is symbolic of all believers—the spiritual Israel, which is the Church. The NT applies to the Church the titles and privileges of Israel. Galatians 3:28 says in Christ, there *“is neither Jew nor Gentile.”* Further, Abraham is *“the father of all who believe”* (Romans 4:11); all believers are his children: *“If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed”* (Galatians 3:7, 29); and constitute *“the Israel of God”* (Galatians 6:16). Paul says all believers are the true Jews: *“A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code”* (Romans 2:28-29). This list of 12 tribes is a reminder that Gentile believers have been grafted into Israel’s heritage alongside Jewish Christians, as a wild olive tree is grafted into a cultivated one (Romans 11).

It seems that John describes the same people, all the redeemed people of God, in two different ways. It is an example of parallelism, saying the same thing twice, in different ways, for emphasis. First, the symbolic number of 144,000 assures us that not one person sealed by the Holy Spirit, Jew or Gentile, will be lost. Second, a vast crowd drawn from every nation, tribe and people will join the kingdom of God. Together they are a new community, the international Church, coming from every people-group of the world. The gospel of Christ is for everyone. Let us be faithful to the missionary vision of the Great Commission for God’s plan of salvation to be fulfilled (Matt. 28:19-20).

The vast crowd of verse 9 fulfils God’s promise to Abraham that he would have descendants too numerous to count (Genesis 15:5; 32:12; Galatians 3:29). It is an international, cross-cultural, and multi-lingual group, yet they all have two things in common. One is their clothing: they are dressed in white and carry palm branches, that are symbols of victory and triumph. The other is their worship. Though from different language-groups, they join together to sing the praises of God. Being “sealed” by God and being “washed by blood” are both images showing us that salvation is God’s work. This is the inspiration for world mission.

The symbolism of 12x12,000 also represents the preservation of all God’s people. Satan cannot destroy the Church. Believers are safe and secure spiritually through any suffering, but this does not mean preservation from martyrdom and suffering. There is no suggestion that God’s sealing is a guarantee of physical protection. An unbelieving world will always be very hostile to the gospel: *“Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted”* (2 Tim. 3:12). Paul tells Timothy such a glorious message as the good news is worthy of our suffering: *“Join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God”* (2 Tim. 1:8). He encourages Timothy: *“Endure hardship like a good soldier of Christ Jesus”* (2 Tim. 2:3). Suffering can help believers move closer to Christ: *“For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ”* (2 Corinthians 1:5). Pain and suffering are a normal part of Christian living!

Revelation shows us how to live through persecution, not escape it, and to be delivered in it. No escapism here! This is the triumph of God through his suffering people. Our hope is in the Tri-une God.

There is much discussion about verse 14: *“These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”*. The basic meaning of “tribulation” is ‘pressure’, a word used for pressing out grapes in a winepress. It suggests the heavy pressures of life that sometimes seem unbearable. This heavenly scene provides great comfort to all believers facing persecution. Some believe this prophecy has already been fulfilled in Titus’s destruction of Jerusalem, and its temple in A.D. 70. Others believe the battle between good and evil will climax in a period of intense persecution of Christians, at the end of this age, just prior to Christ’s second coming. Some believe that Jesus’ prophecy of a future tribulation by an Antichrist will affect only Israel, but not the raptured Church, for either 7 years, or three and a half years. Some argue “the great tribulation” refers to all who enter heaven.

Jesus promised that we would have trouble (NASB ‘affliction’) in this world (John 16:33). Paul said we enter the kingdom of God through many hardships (Acts 14:22). John sees himself as a companion in the believers’ tribulations (Revelation 1:9). Some believe there is no need to limit “the great tribulation” (or ‘the great suffering’ CEV) to any one event, or to a great and final event. They argue “the terrible persecution” (GNB) occurs anywhere the gospel of Christ is opposed and Christians are persecuted. There has been no generation, from the first century until today, when some part of the Church has not faced suffering and persecution. *“The great tribulation”* may simply represent the sufferings of the Church throughout all history.

That the redeemed multitude and the martyrs are the same may be seen in that both groups wear white robes (6:11; 7:9); both groups appear to have had violent deaths (6:11; 7:14). Significantly, all God’s people are given white robes, not just the martyrs (3:4-5, 18; 4:4; 19:14). The white robe is the sign of victory. A Roman general celebrated his triumph clothed in white. The saved stand before God perfect in the righteousness which Christ supplies. Their worship is the appropriate response to God who rules all things. Salvation comes only from God’s “throne” mentioned 7x. As in chapter 5:11-14, where all creation responds in worship, here the angels, elders, and four living creatures worship God and sing to him of seven qualities: *“Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength.”* Again, Christ is *“at the centre of the throne”*.

John sees in a glorious vision that all believers are at home with God in heaven. This inspiring scene describes God’s tender care of his children in their eternal home. All who have been faithful through the ages are singing before God’s throne, and “serve” him with praise, while enjoying eternal and direct fellowship with him. They are free from pain and anxiety and suffering and sorrow. What a reward awaits God’s servants: shelter, no hunger or thirst ever again, no scorching sun upon them, being led like sheep by Jesus to springs of living water, no more tears—imagine that! He wipes the tears from every eye. Their journey into the presence of God has not been easy. They have been protected, but they have not been pampered in life.

They have known the tough experiences of life. On top of all that, they have suffered for their faith, sometimes to the point of death. They have a list of fears and failures to confess. They have taken wrong turnings and stumbled on the way, but God has never failed them. He has cleansed them from the dirt of their sins, healed them from their hurts, and recommissioned them for his service. The days of struggle lie behind them; the journey’s end has justified the hardships. No matter what happens, they will be brought to their reward of eternal life. Their destiny is secure. The faithful followers of Jesus enter the presence of God and the Lamb accepted, victorious, joyful and rewarded. This vision given to John of the final destiny of the redeemed, energises us and inspires our hope. There is a finishing line. Let us keep on keeping on.

#### APPLICATION TO DAILY LIFE

1. Every local church, including this one, is part of the great international family of God. Which parts or aspects of the world-wide community of believers, gives you the most cause for thanks and praise?
2. Ephesians 1:13-14 says, *“When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance”*. In our daily lives, we bear this seal now, although it is invisible to everyone, except God! Yet, does your life reveal that you are God’s possession? Do your words and actions say that you are a person sealed by the Holy Spirit? Pray for grace for this to be so.