

# Ministry of Grace

## Revelation Chapter 7

### 144,000 Missionaries and their Converts

We have just witnessed the Little Lambkin opening the first six seals on the scroll and we were witness to the judgments that were levied against the earth as each seal was opened. Chapter 6 ended with what may have been a comet slamming into the earth causing a massive earthquake and displaying frightening sights in the sky.

One of the effects of a cosmic collision of this type would be to fill the atmosphere with dirt and dust, thus limiting the penetration of the solar rays to the surface of the earth. It is speculated that this could cause what is known as an “impact winter.” All the debris in the atmosphere would have a cooling effect because the sun’s rays would not be able to warm the land masses or evaporate water from the oceans. This could possibly disrupt the hydrologic cycle, even causing the winds to cease for a period of time.

As we begin chapter seven, we see just that, God has ordered that the winds cease for a period of time so that the 144,000 witnesses can be sealed.

#### **Revelation 7:1**

**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.**

“after this” – (literally, *after these things*) This is from the Greek words *meta tauta*, which we talked about at the beginning of chapter four. The events described in this chapter occur after the things of the previous chapter. So, these events occur after the first six seal judgments. This chapter forms a parenthesis between the sixth and seventh seal judgments. It features the sealing of the 144,000 and gives us a glimpse of their martyred converts. But it starts off with a description of a world-wide calm of the winds.

“four corners of the earth” – The word translated “corners” is *gōnia*, which literally refers to “an angle or a corner” but can also mean “a quadrant.” This is most likely a reference to the four points of a compass (North, South, East, and West).

“four winds of the earth” – According to the Greeks and Romans, the winds were arranged under four classes – Zephyrus (West), Boreas (North), Notus (South), and Eurus (East). During the time described in this verse there will be no winds blowing on the earth. Therefore, there will be no breeze or rustling of leaves in the trees, no weather in the form of clouds, rain, or snow, and no waves on the ocean, just an eerie stillness. This is, in a most literal sense, the “calm before the storm.”

“holding” – is from the Greek word *krateō*, meaning “to use strength.” The implication is that the winds are struggling to break forth and are being held back by the great strength of these four angels.

## **Revelation 7:2**

**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,**

“another angel” – The word translated “another” is *allos*, meaning “another of the same kind;” therefore, this cannot be Christ as some have speculated. This is simply “another angel.”

“seal of the living God” – The word “seal” is the Greek word *sphragis*, which is the same word used to refer to the seven seals on the scroll. It implies ownership and it is of the “living God,” not of any idol or false religion. This seal is in contrast to the “mark of the beast” that unbelievers will later receive (**Revelation 13:18-18**).

“the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea” – These angels are the same ones who are holding back the winds. They will be involved in the judgments yet to come, causing great harm to the earth. Based on the following verse, the four winds will be released as soon as the 144,000 have been sealed.

## **Revelation 7:3**

**saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads."**

“Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until ...” – This implies that after the sealing of the 144,000, the four angels **will** harm the earth, the sea, and the trees (see the first three trumpet judgments **Revelation 8:7-11**).

“until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads” – This seal is probably not a physical mark. There is an Old Testament example of this “marking” of the faithful ones in **Ezekiel 9:1-11** where, in Ezekiel’s vision, a man (probably an angel) went through the city of Jerusalem putting a “mark” (meaning a mark or signature like a seal contains) on the foreheads of those who mourned over the abominable things being done in the Temple. Meanwhile other angels with deadly weapons went through the city slaying all who did not have the mark.

Later in Revelation we will see that the False Prophet will require men to receive a mark in their forehead or right hand in order to buy and sell (**Revelation 13:1-18**). This may be a reaction or imitation of the mark that seals the 144,000 evangelists.

“servants” – This is translated from the word *doulos*, which refers to “a slave, one who is in a permanent relation of servitude to another, his will being altogether consumed in the will of the other.” Therefore, these 144,000 who are sealed are those who are saved at this point in the chronology of the Tribulation. Today, we who are saved, are sealed with, and indwelt by, the Holy Spirit, a privilege that the Tribulation saints will not have. Like the Old Testament saints, these who are saved during the Tribulation will not be indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

## **Revelation 7:4**

**And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel:**

“144,000” – This is the second largest specific number in the New Testament which is made up of 12 thousand from each of 12 tribes of the children of Israel. There are some teachers who

claim that these 144,000 represent the church, which they claim is on the earth during the Tribulation. But, according to John MacArthur and Robert L. Thomas:

They cite several New Testament passages that allegedly identify the church as Israel to support that interpretation. But the identification of Israel with the church in those passages is tenuous and disputed. Thus, they can offer no support for such an identification in the present passage. [John MacArthur]

No clear-cut example of the church being called "Israel" exists in the New Testament or in ancient church writings until A.D. 160. ... This fact is crippling to any attempt to identify Israel as the church in **Revelation 7:4**. [Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary*]

These 144,000 are further described in chapter 14.

Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. ... It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb, and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless. (**Revelation 14:1, 4, 5**)

### **Revelation 7:5-8**

**12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed, 12,000 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 were sealed.**

The first question that we have to ask ourselves is whether these numbers are to be taken as literal or as symbolic. Some say that since the surrounding text is all about symbols (they interpret angels, winds, four corners of the earth, etc. as symbolic) then these numbers must also be taken as symbolic. This argument is most often set forth by those who believe that the church will be present on earth during the Tribulation. But there is no reason not to take these numbers as literal (along with the angels, winds, and four quadrants of the earth) especially since the 144,000 is divided up into 12,000 from each of 12 tribes.

The fact that there are 12,000 selected from each of the 12 tribes of Israel further indicates that these are not the church but are, in fact, physical descendants of Israel. The fact that there are exactly 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes indicates God's sovereign selection (election) of these 144,000 rather than random human choice or symbolism.

This is the only listing of the 12 tribes of Israel in the New Testament. There are at least nineteen different ways of listing the 12 tribes of Israel in the Old Testament and there is no standard way of listing them.

"In the Old Testament lists, sometimes the order of birth is followed (**Genesis 29:32 – 35:18**). At other times, it is the order of Jacob's blessing them (**Genesis 49:3-27**), the order of encampment (**Numbers 2:3-31**), the order of the census before the invasion of Canaan (**Numbers 26:4-51**), the order of blessing and cursing (**Deuteronomy 33:6-25**), the order of "the princes" (**Numbers 1:5-15**), the order of inheritance (**Joshua 13:7 – 22:34**), the order by

the wives and concubines (1 Chronicles 2:1 – 8:40), and the order of the gates of the city (Ezekiel 48:31-34).” [Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary*]

Just for reference, the twelve sons of Israel (in birth order) are:

1 – Reuben	2 – Simeon	3 – Levi	4 – Judah
5 – Dan	6 – Naphtali	7 – Gad	8 – Asher
9 – Issachar	10 – Zebulun	11 – Joseph	12 – Benjamin

The sons of Joseph are Ephraim and Manasseh

The list here in **Revelation 7:5-8** excludes Dan, possibly because of their penchant for idolatry (see **Deuteronomy 29:18-21**), and includes Manasseh who was one of the two sons of Joseph.

Based on the following verses, it is obvious that these 144,000 Israelites are missionaries who witness regarding God’s sovereignty and the fact that all the events going on in the world are a warning from Him to repent, because the end is near.

“This critical passage reinforces the biblical truth that God is not through with the nation of Israel (cf. **Romans 9-11**). Though Israel failed in its mission to be a witness nation in the Old Testament, that will not be the case in the future. From the Jewish people will come the greatest missionary force the world has ever known. The result of their effort will be a redeemed Israel, as promised by God, and innumerable redeemed Gentiles.” [John MacArthur]

### **Revelation 7:9-12**

**After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."**

“after this” – (literally, *after these things*) This once again indicates that the following vision is separate from the previous vision and occurs at a point in time after the sealing of the 144,000. It appears that John is now seeing the redeemed from the Great Tribulation (2<sup>nd</sup> half of Daniel’s 70th week) as explained by one of the elders in verses 13 & 14. These are apparently the ones saved as a result of the testimony of the 144,000 who are God’s witnesses during this time. It is apparent that these are not the same as the 144,000 because these are, “*of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues*” whereas the 144,000 are all sons of Israel.

This also appears to be the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel which is often quoted by charismatics of our day and misapplied to the church age. Notice particularly that Joel says “**your sons and your daughters**” in this message given to the Jews.

**"And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit. "And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and**

columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls. (Joel 2:28-32)

“from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” – This is a fulfillment of Jesus’ message to his disciples when asked about the signs of His coming and of the end of the age:

And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. (Matthew 24:14)

This prophecy indicates that all nations must hear the gospel message (regarding the kingdom) before Christ returns and since this innumerable multitude that John is seeing comes from all nations, this vision must be a picture of all the tribulation saints *towards the end of the Great Tribulation*.

“clothed in white robes” – This is the same description (*stolas leukas*) of the clothing worn by the martyrs of the previous chapter. It is possible, therefore, that these are also martyrs. But whether martyrs or not, they are believers who have died during the Great Tribulation.

“palm branches in their hands” – The palm branches are symbols of victory, celebration, deliverance, and joy. According to Albert Barnes:

“Branches of the palm-tree were carried by the victors in the athletic contests of Greece and Rome, and in triumphal processions. The palm-tree - straight, elevated, majestic - was an appropriate emblem of triumph. The portion of it which was borne in victory was the long leaf which shoots out from the top of the tree.” [Albert Barnes' Notes on the Bible]

“Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.” – This seven-fold doxology of praise to God is similar to that proclaimed to the Lamb in Revelation 5:12 with one exception. To the Lamb was ascribed “riches” whereas to God is ascribed “thanksgiving.”

## **Revelation 7:13, 14**

**Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" And I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.**

“Then one of the elders addressed me, saying” – We have shown that the elders represent the church (see notes on Revelation 4:4). The multitudes standing here before the throne must be separate and distinct from the church since they are introduced by the elder.

“These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.” – Literally, “these are the ones coming out of the tribulation, the great one.” The verb “coming out” is a present participle, indicating that they are in the process of coming out of the great tribulation. It depicts a prolonged process, so this group keeps growing as redeemed people keep dying during the Tribulation. Therefore, this scene must be taking place during the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of Daniel’s 70<sup>th</sup> week (the Great Tribulation), perhaps toward the very end. Keep in mind that this great, uncountable multitude consists of all those who have come “out of” the great tribulation and have washed their robes in the blood

of the Lamb. They became “saved” by faith during the tribulation and, apparently, have given their lives as a testimony of their faith.

Also, note that since the form of this verb signifies prolonged action, this group cannot represent the church as it is raptured since the rapture of the church occurs in an instant for the entire church.

Also, remember the promise given to the faithful church of Philadelphia:

Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth.  
(Revelation 3:10)

The faithful believers (Christians) will be kept out of the hour (time) of trial (the tribulation period); therefore, they never were in it. Whereas the innumerable multitude described in Revelation chapter 7 are coming out of the Great Tribulation indicating that they were in the Great Tribulation to begin with.

This also answers the question that many people have raised: “Will people get saved during the Tribulation?” The answer is an unequivocal “YES!” The latter part of verse 14 makes this clear,

... They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.  
(Revelation 7:14)

Since their robes are white, they are righteous and they have been made so by “the blood of the Lamb.” Now, just to make this very clear, these are not Christians! Christians are people who get saved during the period between the crucifixion and the rapture. These are people who get saved during the tribulation. It is nowhere specifically stated what people must believe during the Tribulation in order to be saved, but they will get saved nonetheless.

### **Revelation 7:15**

**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.**

“serve Him day and night in his temple.” – These who are saved out of the Tribulation will have a place of service in the temple. The word “serve” is a form of the Greek word *latreuō*, which is often used to describe priestly service. Therefore, they are performing a “spiritual service of worship” as **Romans 12:1** describes it. Also, notice from **Revelation 21:22** that there will be no temple in the eternal state nor is there day or night there, so this current verse must be describing their service during the millennial kingdom.

Take note that the promises given to tribulation saints are different from those that have been given to Christians during the church age. The tribulation saints are saved after the rapture and they are given different promises than church age saints (Christians). Therefore, Christians and tribulation saints are distinctly different groups of people, just as Jews and Christians are.

### **Revelation 7:16, 17**

**They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."**

“They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.” – This apparently is an allusion to some of the things that they had suffered during the tribulation. As a result of refusing the mark of the beast they suffered hunger and thirst, and as a result of the 4<sup>th</sup> trumpet judgment they suffered from extreme heat from the sun. This is further evidence that this scene takes place toward the end of the tribulation period.

## **So What?**

During the tribulation, God will assign 144,000 witnesses to spread the gospel, that is, the good news. But what is the gospel that they will be preaching? It’s different from the gospel that we preach today, that Jesus is the Son of God and He died on the cross to pay for our sins. Remember, during the tribulation God will be dealing with the Jews, just as He dealt with the Jews before the cross. Before the cross, Jews were to believe that their Messiah is coming, and that He was about to set-up His kingdom. But, because they did not believe that He was coming, they completely missed Him. Instead of celebrating His coming, they crucified Him.

It appears that the good news during the tribulation is that He is coming again to set-up His kingdom, very soon! And – this message will be for all people, not just the Jews. If you read the gospel accounts carefully, you will see that both John the Baptist and Jesus were preaching the gospel of the Kingdom.

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 3:1-2)

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 4:17)

The expression, “The kingdom of heaven” is found 32 times in the gospel accounts alone. And – right after the Tribulation, Jesus *will* set-up His millennial kingdom.

But – the millennial kingdom is not here yet, and neither is the tribulation. Therefore, we still have our good news to preach, the good news of salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ. We don’t have 144,000 witnesses to proclaim the message. Instead, we have millions of Christians all over the world, and you are one of them if you are a born-again Christian.

Are you spreading the good news? If not, why not? We have been given a command by Jesus, Himself:

And he said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.” (Mark 16:15)

Jesus is our Lord, our Master! We all need to be obeying His command!

**Let’s Pray!**

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