

144,000: The Church Triumphant

Revelation 7.1-14; 14.1-5

The Church Militant is guaranteed to be the Church Triumphant.

June 6, 1944 D Day; D+80 liberation of Paris; by January 1945 the Battle of the Bulge was a lost cause for the Germans; April 30, 1945 Hitler commits suicide; May 8, 1945 VE Day

The Allied soldiers made a huge sacrifice on D Day, but that sacrifice gave them such a sure foothold in France that they could march forward knowing that victory would be theirs. They would still meet with stiff resistance, and would even lose some skirmishes and battles. Many more would die in the fight between D Day and V Day. But each day the Allies grew stronger and the Axis waned in strength. In the Battle of the Bulge, the Germans launched a huge offensive in the Ardennes Forest, hoping to regain all of the territory lost to them. You might call this a last ditch effort to stop the inevitable. Of course, it failed. The U.S. moved in quickly to reinforce the lines that the German's pushed back, and within a month the Germans were in retreat. Three months later Hitler killed himself, and a week later the Germans unconditionally surrendered.

The Bible, and the Book of Revelation in particular, teaches us that Jesus dealt the decisive blow of defeat to Satan, death and sin when He died on the cross. His great sacrifice of Himself guaranteed Victory over His and our enemies (Rev 12). But even though Satan is cast down, he does not cease his raging. We still have a very determined foe. The Church and the world still suffer from his evil schemes. The blood of Christ's martyrs is on his hands and on the hands of those who conspire with him against the Lord and against His anointed. But the death of Christ's saints is not their doom, but ironically it is their victory, for in their deaths they beautifully testify to the Lamb who was slain to redeem people from every tribe and language and people and nation. Revelation says that Satan will launch one last major offensive against the people of the Most High. It will be his Battle of the Bulge. He will wreak havoc, but it will be short lived. He cannot stop the inevitable. He will finally be cast into the lake of fire, along with the world system in opposition to the Lamb and all whose names are not written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

We live in the time between D Day and V Day. Like the Allied forces of WWII we can march forward, knowing that our victory is sure because Christ has already won the decisive victory at Calvary. But it is a time of war. The author of Ecclesiastes says, "There is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: . . . a time for war, and a time for peace." For the Church, it is a time for war, a time to fight. Our warfare is not in the flesh, but in the Spirit. Therefore, our weapons are not the fleshly weapons of knives, guns, and missiles. Neither are our weapons those of political intrigue nor psychological manipulation. We aim not to harm people, but to destroy the evil that enslaves them. Our weapon is Truth, the proclamation of Jesus Christ – crucified, buried, risen on the third day, ascended to heaven where He is enthroned King of all, and coming soon to judge the living and the dead. Paul says our weapons are "mighty through God for pulling down strongholds and every lofty thing that exalts itself

against the knowledge of God and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor 10.4-5). John sees V Day on the horizon. Don't give up good soldier of the cross. Christ's message to the Church in the passage we have just read is that the Church Militant is guaranteed to be the Church Triumphant.

Jehovah's Witnesses/Watchtower – 144,000 JW's who rule with Christ over every other human; they have a heavenly existence, while all other "Christians" (JW's) have an eternal earthly existence; all unbelievers are destroyed in the Battle of Armageddon. Take the number literally, while taking the rest of the passage figuratively or not even accounting for the rest of the passage.

Dispensationalism – Jewish Evangelists martyred during the Great Tribulation to immediately precede the return of Christ. Take the number and other details literally and segregate vv. 1-8 from vv. 9-17, and weave vv. 1-8 into their own elaborate chronology of the end times.

Apocalyptic-prophecy – The 144,000 symbolically represents the Universal Church as a standing army that is spiritually protected from God's wrath, though not physically protected from the sinful systems of this world. Take the number and other details symbolically and read vv. 1-8 and vv. 9-17 together as mutually interpretive visions, much like the lion/lamb symbolism for Christ in chapter 5 and the city/bride symbolism of the Church in chapter 21.

As we consider the Church as represented under this symbolism of the 144,000 in Revelation 7 and 14, we will see at least 4 truths related to our warfare and victory.

The Church Militant consists of the true servants of God assembled for Spiritual battle (7:3-9).

The 144,000 are first introduced as "the servants of our God" (v. 3). This term is used throughout Revelation to refer to the saints (1.1; 2.20; 6.11; 7.3; 11.18; 19.2, 5; 22.3, 6; cf. 10.7 where it refers to prophets).

144,000 is twelve squared and multiplied times 1000. Twelve represents the people of God of the Old Testament. Squaring and multiplying times 1000 doubly emphasizes the completion or fullness of the people of God.

That this is not ethnic Israel is confirmed by observing Revelation's method of interpreting what is heard by what is seen and vice versa. First, John *hears* the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel (4). Then, John *sees* 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 (9). John hears 144,000 and sees an innumerable multitude. John hears "from every tribe of the sons of Israel" and sees "from every nation, from all tribes, and peoples and languages."

Thus the 144,000 is not a select group from within the Church as the Jehovah's Witnesses teach. Nor is it a band of Jewish evangelists during the great tribulation as Dispensationalists insist. The 144,000 is the Universal Church – the redeemed from all the earth in every age.

The fact that they are portrayed as the fullness of Israel is consistent with the teaching of the New Testament that those who are in Christ by faith, whether Jews or Gentiles, are the Israel of God (Galatians 6.16). In Ephesians 2-3 Paul argues at great length that God has made both Jews and Gentiles “one and has broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility . . . that He might create in Himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.” Now Gentiles are “fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God . . . fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” In Romans 11 Paul describes the people of God as branches of an olive tree, in which Jewish branches were cut off because of unbelief and Gentiles were grafted in by faith. Ethnic Jews may be grafted in again, but only by faith in Christ. Jesus is the true vine. He is the true Israel. He is the true Seed of Abraham in whom all of the promises are “yes.” Only as we are incorporated into Christ by faith are we a royal priesthood, a chosen generation, a holy nation, God’s own special people. And when we are incorporated into Christ we become one body, one man, in Him. All of God’s promises to the Patriarchs are fulfilled in Jesus and are experienced by God’s people in union with Jesus. And in Christ they receive a fulfillment that transcends the finite minds of the Patriarchs and Prophets of the Old Testament and the Apostles of the New. For even John, the seer, says, “it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.”

But if all Christ wanted to communicate was that the Church is God’s people, the Israel of God, He could have gone straight from verse 4 to verse 9. So, why the census in vv. 5-8? This is what gives the picture its militant imagery. In the Old Testament, especially the book of Numbers, the census did not include all the people. It only included the males 20 years old and up who were fit for military service (see Num 1.2-3; 26.2; cf. 1 Chron 27). God reveals to John, and so to us, that the Church is arrayed for battle. We are not just a random gathering of believers. We are a divinely ordered military to do battle with spiritual wickedness in heavenly places. We are knights, fitted for battle against the dragon, the beast from the sea, and the beast from the land.

The fact that Judah heads the list points to the fact that Christ, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, is the leader of His people. Reuben, the firstborn of Israel, is placed beneath Judah to underscore Judah’s preeminence. The children of the concubines, Gad, Asher, and Naphtali, are moved up in the list to indicate God’s favor on those who may have had less of a claim to be Israel’s heirs than the sons of Rachel and Leah. Dan is deliberately deleted because of that tribe’s association with idolatry and with the anti-Christ in Jewish and Christian literature of the time.

This military imagery is reinforced in chapter 14 where they are said to be those who “have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins (14.4). Again, this is not literal, but symbolic imagery. Soldiers in ancient Israel were to abstain from physical intimacy before entering war and as long as the army was in the field. Remember when David was fleeing from Saul. He came to the tabernacle and asked the priest for provisions. The priest said that all he had was the bread of the presence that was holy, and given to the priests. He was willing to give it to David’s soldiers only if they were ceremonially clean. David assures him “Truly women have been kept from us as always when I go on an expedition. The vessels of the young men are holy even when it is an ordinary journey. How much more today will

their vessels be holy?" You'll also recall how David, in order to cover up for his sin with Bathsheba, tried to get her husband, Uriah, to come home from the field and sleep with Bathsheba. Uriah, however, was too noble to violate the sanctity of holy war and bring reproach on his brothers in the field, so he would not go in to her. Here, the people of God are portrayed as ceremonially fit for battle. Not only have they abstained in the days leading up to the battle, they are in fact virgins!

So, the Church Militant consists of the true servants of God assembled for spiritual battle. And since it is a spiritual battle, the real dangers are spiritual dangers – temptations to fear, doubt, compromise with the world, or retreat into the false safety of silencing our witness to Christ. The good news is that God gives us impenetrable armor for this warfare.

The Church Militant is protected from spiritual deception by belonging to God (7:1-3, 14; 14:1, 4-5).

The four winds are apocalyptic symbols that capture the devastation wreaked on humanity as the wrath of God is poured out. But before the seventh seal is opened, unleashing God's wrath in utter destruction, an angel calls out with a loud voice to the four angels holding back the four winds, and tells them to stay their hands until the Lord's people are sealed.

God's seal represents His ownership and protection of His people. It is not a brand as much as it is the seal of His signet ring impressed on our foreheads indicating, on the one hand that we are His people and thus owe Him our allegiance, and on the other that He is our God and thus affords us His protection. In 14.1 we learn that the seal is "His [the Lamb's] name and His Father's name." This blessed seal was promised to all who overcome in Christ's words to Philadelphia, "I will write on him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and My own new name" (3.12).

Of course, the beast also has his mark. But it is not called a seal, but a mark or brand. It shows his ownership, the fact that he possesses these people. But it is a tyrannical possession that offers no final protection. Evil turns in on itself, ultimately to consume its own. Those who sport the mark of the beast, which I do not have time to get into, may enjoy a relative freedom in the beginning, but it will be no refuge from the anger of the beast, nor from the wrath of the Lamb.

The question that ends chapter 6 and the sixth seal was, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" Who can stand? Only the servants of God who are sealed with the name of the Lamb and of His Father.

If we were to look for a reality or thing to correspond to the symbol of sealing, we would probably have to say the Spirit of God. Ephesians 1.13-14 "In Him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in Him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of His glory." And the book of Revelation certainly has a Trinitarian view of God that recognizes the Spirit's role in the Church.

The effects of God's protection is spelled out in spiritual and moral terms in 14.4-5. We are not defiled, but are precious firstfruits for God and the Lamb. In a world dominated by lies and all sorts of blasphemies against God and Christ, "in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless." This is not because of our moral effort, but because, as the Angel says in 7.14 "They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." We have seen that the blood of Jesus frees us from the bondage of sin. Here we see that His blood cleanses us from the filth of sin.

My dog, Cayman, likes to eat cat poop. I find that repulsive, and won't let him lick me or even breathe on me when he does it. That is a picture of the uncleanness and filth of sin. And God abhors sin. His eyes are too pure to look on sin. How repulsive we sinners must be in the eyes of the One who is Holy Holy Holy. "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully" (Psalm 24.3-4). But who qualifies? Does Moses, who struck and killed an Egyptian and later struck the rock when God told him to speak to the rock? Does David qualify, who had his way with Bathsheba and then arranged for his murder? Does Abraham, who told two rulers on two different occasions that Sarah was his sister, just so that things would go well with him? Whose hands are clean? Whose heart is so pure? Who is completely free from deceit so that no lie is found in his mouth, but he is blameless? Surely not any of these men or any of us. How then can we sing with David that we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever? How can we stand before the throne of God with boldness and not with shame? "They washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

The Spirit applies the blood of Christ to us and forgives our sin and cleanses us from all unrighteousness.

The Church Militant will be vindicated as the Church Triumphant in heaven (7:9-17; 14:2-3).

The white robes indicate their acceptance with God and thus their vindication in the face of the world's condemnation.

Look at the blessedness described in verses 15-17. That's vindication.

The new song is the song of military victory (14.2-3).

The Church Triumphant will lead heaven in praise to God and the Lamb forever (7:10-12; 14:3).

Note the song of the redeemed (7.10).

Note the response of heaven (7.11-12).

The new song is only for the redeemed (14.3). Heaven listens and responds, but only the redeemed can sing this song.

If the angels rejoice when one lost soul is found, imagine the rejoicing in heaven when the entire company of the redeemed surround God's throne to sing, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

It is no wonder Paul says, "In love He predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will, to the praise of His glorious grace, with which He has blessed us in the Beloved" (Eph 1.5-6).

This is what we have to look forward to as we fight here below. There is a time for war and a time for peace. Now is the time for war. Now is the time to pull down strongholds and every lofty opinion that exalts itself against God. Now is the time to bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.

In his rallying cry entitled "The American Crisis" Thomas Paine wrote this to a nation wavering in its resolve because Washington was forced to retreat from General Howe:

THESE are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives every thing its value.

John says to us in the Apocalypse, "These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine saint will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their God. Hell is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. We have the dearest treasure in heaven and earth – the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let everything else in life and death be valued in its light.

Soldiers of Christ, take every opportunity to be equipped for this fight. Apply yourself with diligence to Spiritual exercises. Don't just come to Sunday School and listen passively. Prepare for Sunday School and Church gatherings so that you will maximize your benefit. Determine not to be a mere hearer of the word but a doer. The blessing in Revelation 1.3 is for those who hear and who keep what is written herein.

Engage in the battle by looking for beaches on which to land. You must be conversant with the gospel so that you can bring the gospel into any conversation. Don't be the soldier who hides in the stairwell while your brother in arms is gutted by the enemy in the room above.

You can protect your honor now by not standing up for Jesus, but you will forgo the honor that Christ bestows on the final day. Matthew 10.32-33

Let's join the battle now in the long, cold dark of winter so that we may greet the spring with the joy of victors.