

# THE NUMBER OF THE SEALED

## Revelation 7:1-12

Rev. Dr. Richard D. Phillips  
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And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel (Rev. 7:4).

**T**he book of Revelation weaves its visions in an intricate and closely knit tapestry. For instance, in chapter 6 the martyrs beneath God's throne ask when he will avenge their suffering and are told to wait "until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete" (Rev. 6:11). The opening of the next seal answers this prayer as the human race is subjected to judgment. Terrified mankind asks in dismay: "who can stand?" (Rev. 6:17). Chapter 7 answers that question, depicting "a great multitude" of God's people "standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (Rev. 7:9-10). The full number of the martyrs' fellow servants is represented as "144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel" (Rev. 7:4). This imagery clearly depicts the great difference between those who trust in Jesus and those who refuse him in unbelief. The Christian suffers below but then reigns in heaven above. The unbeliever reigns in sin below but suffers heaven's wrath from above.

At the end of Revelation 6, the sixth seal has been broken, unleashing the final day of God's wrath. Before the seventh seal, which can only signify the return of Christ and the beginning of the new age, Revelation 7 provides a dramatic interlude. It shows that God's people, being righteous in Christ, are safeguarded through the tribulations of the world in order to glorify God in heaven.

## SEALED AND SECURED

**I**t is important to remember that Revelation does not present a straight-line chronology of the end times but rather a series of overlapping visions to present history from the perspective of heaven. Along these lines, chapter 7 cycles back to the time of the first four seals in chapter 6, which describe the calamities by which Christ judges sin and advances his kingdom. John 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” (Rev. 7:1). These angels are closely related to the four horsemen of chapter 6. Not only are there four of both, but in the book of Zechariah, where these images originate, God’s horsemen are closely related to the four winds (Zech. 6:5). Winds present another image of judgment and disaster, as anyone who has endured a hurricane can tell you, and the four winds are a metaphor for the entirety of the earth. Here, the four angels are “holding back” the winds, that is, restraining God’s judgments from utterly destroying the earth.

If we wonder why the angels are restraining the winds, a second angel appears to explain: “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, saying, ‘Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads’” (Rev. 7:2-3). The earth, sea, and trees depict the entirety of the earth. The point is that the final judgment, depicted under the sixth seal, is being suspended so that the whole number of God’s people may be gathered. This fits God’s answer to martyrs of the fifth seal, saying that vengeance would wait “until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete” (Rev. 6:11).

In the Bible, news of salvation often appears from the east, just as Ezekiel said the Lord will enter his temple from the east (Eze. 43:2) and the magi who worshiped Christ came from the east (Mt. 2:1). Now from that direction comes an angel bearing “the seal of the living God” to mark “the servants of God” (Rev. 7:2-3).

In the ancient world, a seal was used to *identify* an object as belonging to its master or to *authenticate* a message as coming from him. A common kind of seal was a signet ring, which bore the emblem of its

owner. In the case of the angel's seal, the biblical background is Ezekiel 9. God gave the prophet a vision of his judgment of Jerusalem, but first he marked his faithful people: "Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sign and groan over all the abomination that are committed in it" (Eze. 9:4). Only those marked with God's seal would escape his judgment. In Revelation 14:1, we are told that the "144,000... had [the Lamb's] name and his Father's name written on their foreheads." It seems likely, then, that the seal in Revelation 7 affixes the name of Christ and of the Father on their servants.

As in Ezekiel 9, the point of this sealing is that the faithful people of God will not be harmed by the calamities of the four riders or the blowing of the four winds. This does not mean that Christians will not suffer in earthly ways, since the fifth seal shows that many of them suffered death for God's Word. Christians in this life suffer all manner of grief – sickness, poverty, oppression, slander, and death – yet through these Christians enter salvation. James Boice writes: "What this sealing accomplishes is their perseverance in faith, God's work in them to assure that they will stand firm to the end."<sup>1</sup> Paul wrote: "God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: 'The Lord knows those who are his'" (2 Tim. 2:19). Everyone who calls on Jesus in true faith is immediately marked by God to be saved out of this world. Jesus assured us: "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (Jn. 5:24).

The biblical idea of sealing not only identifies ownership and authenticates but also signifies *protection*. Jesus' grave was sealed to ensure that it would not be broken into, and God seals his people to guarantee our salvation. Paul spoke in this sense of the Holy Spirit: "when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, [you] 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" (Eph. 1:13-14). God's seal is the indwelling Holy Spirit, whose presence accomplishes all three things a seal does. The Holy Spirit *identifies* a true Christian by the transforming effects in his or her life. The Holy Spirit *authenticates* a Christian's testimony, enabling our lives to attest to the truth of the gospel.

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<sup>1</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Revelation*, unpublished manuscript, 20:3.

Finally, the Holy Spirit *protects* our faith unto salvation. His coming to regenerate believers is the beginning that guarantees the end and gives us a foretaste of the inheritance we will fully possess in glory. William Hendriksen writes, “This sealing is the most precious thing under heaven.”<sup>2</sup> By the seal of God’s Spirit we are *identified* as belonging to him; we are *authenticated* and assured of God’s saving blessing; and we are secured and *protected* against those things that would threaten our faith and separate us from God.

Since God’s Spirit is the all-important seal of our salvation, how do we know that we possess the Spirit? Jesus once answered by comparing the Spirit to the wind, saying, “You hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from” (Jn. 3:8). His point was that the Spirit is only known by his effects. You feel and observe tangible evidence and that tells you the wind has blown. By the marks of the Holy Spirit we know his presence in a person’s life, authenticating a profession of faith and sealing the Christian for salvation.

Perhaps the greatest book on the marks of the Holy Spirit was written by Jonathan Edwards, the 18<sup>th</sup> century American preacher and theologian. Edwards was concerned about false conversions during the Great Awakening, and he conducted a biblical study of what differentiates true versus false conversions. His book was titled *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* and his theme verse was 1 John 4:1: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.”<sup>3</sup>

Edwards first noted that outward evidences like strong emotions or an enthusiastic response to God’s Word can occur without the Holy Spirit. He then listed five marks that only the Spirit can produce and which thus validate a person’s claim to faith in Christ. First, Edwards noted, *the elevation of esteem in Jesus Christ* as the Son of God and Savior. This is the surest sign of the true operation of the Holy Spirit. “He will bear witness about me,” Jesus said of the Spirit (Jn. 15:26); “He will glorify me” (Jn. 16:14). Second, a true work of the Spirit *opposes the reign of Satan and causes us to turn from sin* (see 1 Jn. 1:5-6). God’s Spirit is a Spirit of holiness, causing believers to seek new lives that honor God. Third, a true conversion inspires *an*

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<sup>2</sup> William Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1940, 1967), 110.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God in Jonathan Edwards on Revival* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1965).

*increase of interest in God's Word*, a desire to know what the Bible teaches and to put it into practice. Fourth, the Spirit enlightens us with a *sound grasp of true doctrine* and gives a zeal to defend it against error. Fifth is *the mark of love*. Edwards writes, "If the spirit that is at work among a people operates as a spirit of love to God and man, it is a sure sign that it is the Spirit of God."<sup>4</sup> False spirituality is interested in self, but the Spirit gives a concern for others, an eagerness to sacrifice, and a heart that gladly forgives and happily serves.

Given the significance of God's seal, every Christian should zealously pursue the evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence. We can never earn God's seal, but by a living faith we can experience the mark of God's Spirit. And how encouraging it is to us, even under trials, to know the Spirit's indwelling. The Spirit is the "seal of the living God" (Rev. 7:2). God is not a dead idol but lives so as to protect and provide for us. The winds may blow and we may suffer, but angels are restraining judgment for our sake and God himself has pledged our salvation. For this reason, Charles Spurgeon emphasized the joyful hope that should characterize Christians in a hostile world, since even through trials we are being saved: "It is impossible that any ill should happen to the man who is beloved of the Lord. Ill to him is no ill, but only good in a mysterious form. Losses enrich him, sickness is his medicine, reproach is his honour, death is his gain."<sup>5</sup>

## THE 144,000 SEALED SERVANTS

**T**ogether with the vision of the angels, John "heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel: 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" (Rev. 7:4-8). This recitation extends the vision that began with the angels, identifying the sealed servants of God.

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<sup>4</sup> Edwards, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*, 115.

<sup>5</sup> Cited from Steve Wilmschurst, *The Final Word: The Book of Revelation Simply Explained* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2008), 96.

The first question about this body of people is how we should understand it. Some readers interpret the 144,000 literally. A prominent example is the Jehovah's Witnesses, who believe that only 144,000 people will spend eternity in heaven. They further teach that this number was achieved in 1935, so and believers after that date will not enter heaven but will make up the blessed multitude on earth which they see described in verses 9-17. Not only is there no basis for this interpretation, but it gets the two groups exactly backward. In John's vision, the 144,000 sealed servants are undergoing trials on earth and the vast multitude describes the Christians in heaven.

Another literal approach is taken by Dispensationalists, who by far make up the majority of Evangelical Christians in America today. Dispensationalists begin with the premise that Israel and the Christian church are separate bodies with different eternal destinies. They also interpret Revelation's visions in an exclusively futurist sense, as pertaining only to the final sequence of years prior to Christ's return. With these presuppositions, Dispensationalists see the 144,000 as the literal number of ethnic Jews who convert to Christ after the rapture and bear witness to the gospel in the final days.<sup>6</sup>

There are overwhelming reasons to reject the Dispensationalist approach and instead to understand 144,000 as a symbolic number. First, the Dispensational view treats chapter 7 as chronologically following chapter 6, showing what happens after the sixth seal. Yet this is impossible, since the sixth seal showed the dissolution of the heavens and the earth in the great day of God's wrath (Rev. 6:12-17). All that remains is the physical return of Christ, which the seventh seal signifies. These 144,000 are not sealed after the sixth seal but rather during the calamities of the first four seals.

Second, Dispensationalists insist that the references to Israel require a literal rendering of the 144,000, especially in light of the naming of specific tribes. This argument exposes the chief weakness of their argument: the failure to note that the Christian church is organically joined with Old Testament Israel. Whereas Dispensationalists eternally separate Israel and the church, Revelation consistently refers to Christians with the imagery of Israel. The number of Christ's apostles corresponds to Israel's tribes and Jesus promised that they would "sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Mt.

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<sup>6</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 463-82.

19:28). Paul said that a believer in Christ is a true Jew (Rom. 2:29). He taught that Gentile Christians are grafted into the olive tree of Israel (Rom. 11:17-19), and he referred to the Christian church as “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16). Revelation is filled with allusions to Israel, the Old Testament, and the ancient temple, all with reference to the identity and experience of his Christian readers. It is most natural, therefore, to see Israel’s tribes as referring to the church.

Questions are raised about the specific list that John cites, noting the names of twelve tribes from Israel. It is an unusual list for several reasons. First, Judah is listed first, since Jesus was born from that tribe. The tribe of Dan is omitted, along with Ephraim. The probable reason for this is that Jeroboam’s golden calves were erected in Dan and Ephraim, so that these two tribes led Israel into idolatry. Since idolaters do not enter the kingdom of God, these tribes are omitted. Moreover, this list presents the sons of Jacob’s concubines before the sons of Jacob’s wives: after Judah and Reuben the firstborn come Gad, Asher, Naphtali, born of concubines, and then the sons born of Jacob’s wives: Manasseh, Simeon, Levi, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin. The most likely suggestion regarding this ordering is that the sons of Jacob’s concubines signify the inclusion of the Gentiles, who are now inserted ahead of legitimate Israelite sons. At the time of John’s writing, the twelve tribes no longer even existed in a literal sense, having been eradicated by God in the various exiles of Israel.<sup>7</sup>

These considerations make it obvious that the 144,000 sealed servants are to be taken symbolically rather than literally. The number is achieved by multiplying twelve, for Israel, by twelve, for the apostles, to signify the entirety of the redeemed church. This matches the heavenly city of chapter 21, with twelve gates for Israel’s tribes and twelve foundations for the apostles (Rev. 21:12-14), signifying the entirety of the redeemed church. This number is multiplied by a thousand probably to show the great multitude of Christ’s people. The idea of Christians being numbered like Israel’s tribes may suggest that the church forms an army, carrying forth the banner of the gospel.<sup>8</sup> With the winds of judgment and calamity being restrained

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<sup>7</sup> See a thorough explanation in Dennis Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 132-133.

<sup>8</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 313.

for their passage and, having being sealed by God, the church triumphantly advances to heaven.

This symbolic understanding is made certain by the verses that follow: “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” (Rev. 7:9). This language reminds us of chapter 5. There, John heard that the Lion of Judah could open the scroll and then he looked and saw the Lamb amidst the throne (Rev. 5:5-6). The Lion and the Lamb are the same person: John heard one thing about him and then saw another. Likewise, John hears of the 144,000, then turns and sees the great multitude beyond counting. They are one body, the church, first depicted in battle array on earth and then as glorified in heaven.

In this way, the progression of chapter 7 is completed. First are the four angels restraining the winds of judgment and woe. The other angel comes to seal the servants of God, seen symbolically in the world as militant Israel. Finally, God’s people are revealed as a vast multitude beyond human comprehension, glorified in heaven and rejoicing in the worship of their Savior God.

## THE PLENTIFUL HARVEST

**W**hen we think of the church in terms of Israel marching from Egypt to the Promised Land in the days of the exodus, we are reminded of the necessity of our perseverance in faith. Most of the Israelites who departed from Egypt under Moses never entered the Promised Land because of their rebellion and unbelief. Hebrews 4:2 warns that many who attend church today are like the outward members of Israel who never entered salvation, explaining that “the messages they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened.” This warns us that mere membership or attendance at church does not grant us salvation, but only true saving faith and the indwelling Holy Spirit. Revelation 7 assures us that true believers are sealed by God so as to persevere all the way to heaven. The question is: “Are we true believers, and do our lives bear testimony to the presence and power of God’s Spirit?” The first application of Revelation 7, then, is for us to know the reality



of the Spirit's presence in our lives, rather than a mere outward Christianity. Have we embraced Christ in a living faith, which alone can attest to our sealing by God for salvation?

Two more applications flow from these visions. Revelation 7:9-10 shows the church above occupied in praising God for their salvation. The great multitude is "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!'" We will consider these verses later in greater detail. But we should notice that this scene matches that of the Feast of Tabernacles in Israel, which celebrated both the successful completion of the exodus and the ingathering of the annual harvest. We see this especially in the waving of palm branches, which was one of the chief features of this festival, praising God for the ingathered harvest. How appropriate this worship will be in heaven, when the entire harvest of Christ's people will have been gathered in.

One reason John was shown this worship above was to inspire Christians here in this present world – during the trials signified by the first four seals – to glorify God for the salvation that is completely secured by his grace. The saints above sing to God and to the Lamb, thanking them for the salvation that is of sovereign grace alone: "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!" Our salvation is the Father's will and the Son's work, so they are worthy to be praised by us. There is no reason why we should wait for heaven to give this praise, since our salvation is as secure now as it will be accomplished then. Augustus Toplady wrote: "More happy, but not more secure, the glorified spirits in heaven."<sup>9</sup> How we rejoice to know that we will be more happy once in heaven. But how we also rejoice to know that we are just as secure now amidst the trials of earth as we will be forever in the splendors of heaven.

John's vision continues in verses 11-12 with the angels of heaven worshiping God because of what they have learned through our salvation: "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen" (Rev. 7:12). Knowing this, we should endeavor to live now in such a way that watching angels will marvel at the power of God's grace in our lives so as to praise our Savior forever.

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<sup>9</sup> Augustus M. Toplady, "A Debtor to Mercy Alone," 1771.

Finally, we are reminded of the gospel imperative that shapes the calling of every Christian. Why has judgment not yet come? Why are the angels restraining the four winds? The answer is so that the full number of God's elect people may come in. Our present history exists for the saving of the great multitude that will worship above. Like the twelve tribes in marching order, the church is sent through history on a gospel mission, to take the good news of Jesus Christ throughout the world so that countless millions will be saved.

Do we have a missional mindset and zeal that fits this picture? Looking on the heavenly Feast of Tabernacles celebrating the final harvest, do we realize that the work in the fields is taking place right now? A zealous church should be asking, "What more can we do to reach out with the gospel to those around us and throughout the world?" What role are you playing in the great harvest of the gospel for salvation? Do you pray for specific people to be saved? Do you warmly invite neighbors to church? Are you prepared to explain the gospel message of Jesus to others and are you willing to do so?

The gospel imperative is written across John's vision no less surely than the name of God and the Lamb are written on the foreheads of his people. The vast hosts of heaven, saints and angels alike, will spend eternity glorifying God for the salvation he has given. What a joyful privilege it is for us to be his servants on earth, sealed and protected by his Spirit, to carry the gospel to the lost. "The harvest is plentiful," Jesus told his disciples, but regretted, "the laborers are few" (Mt. 9:37).