

The 144'000

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Date: 07 March 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Well, this last year, we've been through the last 12 months, which has been marked primarily by, of course, the global pandemic of COVID. It's raised a lot of important questions, I think.

And what are the questions that we've got to be asking as we look back over the last year? What will living in a post-COVID world look like? How will we prevent another pandemic?

What kind of social changes will we need to implement? Will we ever shake hands again? There's questions that COVID has raised about alcohol consumption in our country. And we look at the tourism industry.

We've got to ask questions of how we can stimulate that after COVID. And so there's a lot of these questions that we'll be asking after this global pandemic. But there is a more important question we should be asking after COVID.

In fact, we should be asking it after any reminder that this world is under God's judgment and it has a broken relationship with him, which is really what a pandemic does. We saw last week in Revelation 6, represented by the four horsemen, that the bad things that come to this world are here as warnings that all is not right between us and God.

[1 : 1 0] And bad stuff will keep happening. There will be more pandemics. There will be more global disasters after this one. And that will keep on happening until Jesus Christ comes back and repossesses this earth for his father and removes and destroys all that threatens God's good plans for this world.

And that is called, of course, the day of the Lord, which is prefigured in history by days of the Lord before. But it culminates in one final day of the Lord where Jesus comes back. And we read last week, if you haven't listened to that sermon, listen to the sermon on Revelation 6 and just look at where this world is leading up to and the meaning of all the problems in this world and what they are meant to tell us.

But after that, the most important question we should be asking, therefore, after a global pandemic is not, will we ever shake hands again or do we have to carry on wearing masks when we go to the shop?

The most important question is, who can stand on the day of the Lord? If all of this is pointing towards the ultimate day of the Lord coming and that's what we're being warned towards, then the real question we should be asking is, who's going to survive that day?

You know, if millions have died of COVID, who's going to survive when Jesus actually comes back? And that's, of course, the question that's asked right at the end of chapter 6. Look in your Bibles, Revelation 6 ends with that question.

[2 : 3 3] The great day of their wrath has come and who is able to stand? Very important question. I think probably the most important question we can be asking is that question that's asked in Revelation 6, 17.

Revelation 7 is the answer. So that's what we're going to look at this morning. And the answer we find out, those who will be able to stand, those who will be able to survive the righteous judgment of God on this world are those that He has sealed.

And that's what the sealed of Israel, that's what this chapter is about. And what we're going to do is we're going to try to find out who this group of sealed people are.

We're going to look at what characterizes them. And hopefully that will help you to ask yourself the question whether you are part of them or not.

Okay. So that's where we're going. So let's start and see what it says from verse 1 to 3. Again, lots of symbolic.

[4 : 03] picture language here, but what we get is that God, to a certain extent, is holding back his judgments on the earth until he seals his people. That's what's going on here. They're being restrained. These heavenly forces that God is going to send are being restrained until his people are fully sealed. Now, we've got to understand what it means that they are sealed.

Now, what it doesn't mean is that they are immune from trouble. That's one of the common misunderstandings of this idea that we're going to get into in Revelation called the Great Tribulation.

Okay, you've possibly heard that before. If you've done any work in Revelation or heard people talk on Revelation, there's this thing called the Great Tribulation. And some Christians have this idea that we will be raptured before the Great Tribulation, right? That we'll fly off into the sky and then all the trouble will come down onto the earth and Christians will be spared from it. But that's not really what it says here. And I can show you why. So, in verse 14 in chapter 7, it talks about this Great Tribulation. It says when John is asking who these people are, he's told these are the ones coming out of the Great Tribulation. And that is often interpreted to mean this Great Tribulation is something that's going to happen in the future. This great war is going to happen, Armageddon, and all the Christians will be rescued from it and taken up. I don't know if you've ever watched those movies.

Nicholas Cage, I think, stars in them. He starred in one that was similar. But the Left Behind series where things are just going crazy and then Christians just start disappearing left, right, and center from this Great Tribulation. But I think it's a slightly off-reading, actually quite a large off-reading of Revelation. And the reason is because the Bible clearly shows us in Revelation and elsewhere that we are already in the Great Tribulation. Okay? So, this Great Tribulation that is spoken of in Revelation, we are already in it in this age. How do I know that? Well, the Old Testament. Okay?

So, the Great Tribulation, this idea of Great Tribulation, we first see it in Daniel chapter 11 and 12. And Primrose read a little bit from those chapters for us earlier. But what's happening in Daniel 11 and 12, where this idea of the Great Tribulation is introduced, is that God's people are going through some hectic times.

[6 : 45] There's international wars going on around them. There's an empire that invades them, the King of the North. And during this time, many fall away. So, I'll read from Daniel 11 from verse 32.

This describes after the King of the North invades. This is what happens. With flattery, he will corrupt those who act wickedly towards the covenant. But the people who know their God will be strong and take action.

Those who have insight among the people will give understanding to many. Yet they will fall by the sword and flame and be captured and plundered for a time. Okay? So, God's covenant people are going through some hectic times here.

And many of them are being tempted to fall away from the covenant, to betray the covenant. But those who stay true to God and His calling on them, they suffer.

Now, if you read Daniel 11 and 12, what you realize is this has already happened. It happened in 160 BC with the invasion of the Syrian Empire.

- [7 : 52] If you look at the history, it pretty much happened exactly like Daniel predicted. And that was known as the Great Tribulation. So, God's people already went through the Great Tribulation where they were tempted to forsake the covenant in BC, 160 BC.
- But then, we don't have to turn there, but you might recognize this. In Matthew 24, Jesus starts talking about the Great Tribulation again. He starts using this Daniel language, the abomination of desolation, which is in Daniel.
- But He's using it to refer to something that's going to happen in the future for His disciples in their lifetime, which is the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, which happened about 40 years later in AD 70.
- And He's using the same prophecy in Daniel to describe that Great Tribulation that God's people are going to go through. And then, John in Revelation refers to the Roman persecution of His day also as the Great Tribulation.
- And so, if we trace this idea of the Great Tribulation in Scripture, what we discover is that it refers to a repeated pattern in history of God's people caught up in the trouble of the world, where they are tempted to forsake the covenant.
- [9 : 03] And it happens not just once. Yes, it is tied to particular points in history. The invasion of the Syrian Empire in 160 BC. The destruction of the temple in 70 AD.
- The persecution of the Roman Empire in John's day. But it's repeated. It's a pattern that God's people in every generation face to a certain extent.
- The troubles and the warfare of the world around them that in some way tempts them to forsake the covenant. And so, what God is doing here, if we understand that context, back in Revelation, what God is doing in sealing His people is preparing them to survive the tribulations of this age without forsaking it.
- And so, ultimately, survive the day of the Lord when it comes. That's what He's doing. And He does this by marking them beforehand. Chapter 7, verse 2.
- I saw another angel rising from the east who had the seal of the living God. It's the picture of a signet ring. So, back in the day, people would have known you don't have it so much today, where a person will mark a letter or something with a signet ring.
- [10 : 16] But it's also got the idea of a branding to it. So, if you have ever farmed cattle, I don't know if anyone here has been a cattle farmer, but you brand your cattle, right, with a brand to make sure that people know that it's yours.
- I guess the closest modern equivalent is putting your name in your school books or on your PT shorts to make sure that people know they're yours and they won't take them.
- That's kind of what's going on here. It's a sign of ownership. God is marking His people who will survive the day of the Lord and who won't fall away from His covenant with a sign of His ownership.
- And that's really the first characteristic that we must realize about these people who are saved from judgment is that they are owned by God.
- And they know it. And the people around them know it. They are not in charge of their own life. God is. And that is what characterizes or marks out these people, is that they're marked as the servants of God.
- [11 : 22] They're possessed. They're owned by someone, not themselves, by their God. And so I guess the question we should be asking, if we call ourselves Christians, is how clear is it to the people around us that you are owned by God?
- Think about that. At work, at school. Do the people around you know that you are owned by God? Can they see the mark that God has put on you, the seal of His ownership, in the way you think, in the way you talk, in your priorities in your life?

It's a good question to ask. But the passage goes on to elaborate then just who these people are. And it turns out there's seemingly only 144,000 of them.

That should cause us concern. Let's read it closer and try to work that out. The 144,000 from verse 4. And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000 sealed from every tribe of the Israelites.

12,000 from the tribe of Judah, 12,000 from the tribe of Reuben. And so it goes on to list all the tribes of Israel. There's some interesting things in the order and the tribes that are mentioned there, but we don't have time to get into it.

[12 : 38] We've got to work out who this 144,000 are. Now, this is often misunderstood as a literal number. So the Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, they do believe that this is the literal number of people who will be saved and rule creation with Jesus.

144,000. Now, apparently, like at the last count, there's a couple of million Jehovah's Witnesses in the world, so they're going to be fighting for places. But that's not actually what it's talking about. Because Revelation is filled with symbols, right?

We've already seen that in these pictures of horsemen and beasts and thrones and swords coming out of mouths. It's symbolic language, and John uses pictures to represent realities.

But here's the thing. He also uses numbers in Revelation to represent realities, to symbolize realities. And he's not the first. It was a common thing in Hebrew culture.

Numbers were far more important to them in their symbolism and what they represented than they are to us. And so it's a world and a way of thinking that we don't often understand.

[13 : 48] I mean, I guess even us, we have certain numbers that have certain significance more than other numbers, right? To some people, 13 is an unlucky number. There's no 13th floor in lots of hotels because of that.

To other people, well, to most people in our culture, 21. You turn 21, that's a significant number, right? So there's these significant numbers. But to the Hebrews, they had lots of significant numbers based on their scriptures.

So 7 was a significant number, talking about perfection and creation. 12 was a significant number, the people of God, the 12 apostles, the 12 tribes of Israel.

10 was a significant number. Talking about completion. And so if we understand the symbolism of numbers, then this digit here, 144,000, is not too hard to work out.

So 12 represents the people of God. 12 times 12 represents the people of God in both the new and the old covenants. The 12 apostles represented by the 12 apostles in the 12 tribes of Israel.

[14 : 53] 10 represents completion. Now anything cubed, go with me on this one, anything cubed alludes to holiness and the holy place of God.

It's no mistake that the holy place, the holy of holies in Solomon's temple was a cube. Those were its dimensions. And in Revelation 21, the holy city is described as a cube, which the idea of three and the trinity, it talks about the presence of God and holiness.

Now guess what 144,000 is? It's 12 times 12 times 10 cubed. Okay, that's 144,000. It's the entire people of God and the holy place of God together.

In other words, it's the complete number in all generations of holy people of God. The entirety of it.

The entirety of the holy people of God, which is his presence on earth. Okay, so that's what the 144,000 means. But what about the tribes here being counted into 12,000 each?

[15 : 55] Well, that also, unsurprisingly by now hopefully, comes from the Old Testament. Numbers chapter 1. Moses is taking a register of all the tribes of Israel before they go into the wilderness on the way to the promised land, preparing them for war.

It's a military census. And it's very similar to what we read here. Numbers chapter 1. It's listing the tribes and listing their numbers. And incidentally, 1,000 was a military unit.

And so 12,000 is the church militant, if you like. It's the people of God who are being armed for battle. Okay, so all together, take all of those images together.

The 144,000. The 12 times 1,000 of each tribe. What do you get? Well, this symbolizes the complete number of God's holy people preparing for warfare as they head through tribulation to the promised land, which is the new creation.

That's what the 144,000 are. And that is what John hears. But notice that he only hears it. Verse 4, and I heard the number of the seals. So he hears this army being counted.

[17 : 09] This military formation of God's holy people preparing to fight as they face tribulation, like they did in the wilderness in the Old Testament. He hears that.

But then what he turns and sees is quite different. We've got to pause there because this is not the only time we discover this pattern of hearing and then seeing something in Revelation.

It happens a few times in Revelation that John hears one thing and then he turns and sees another. But it's the same thing from a different perspective. So the first time is in chapter 5 where you'll remember he hears about the Lion of Judah, this great conquering lion.

But then he turns and what he sees is a suffering bloodied lamb. But it's the same. They're both symbols of Jesus Christ. And it's Jesus Christ from the heavenly perspective of him as the Lion of Judah conquering.

But from the earthly perspective, he doesn't look like a conqueror. He suffered as a lamb. But it's the same picture. So it's one of the ways when John hears something and sees another, it's one of the ways of seeing both the heavenly and earthly perspectives on something.

[18 : 19] And so when John hears about this military force being ready to go through the tribulation that God is equipping as the holy people of God from Israel, he then turns and sees.

What does he see? Well, let's look at verse 9. After this I looked and there was a vast multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language which no one could number.

Standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands and they cried out in a loud voice, Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb.

All the angels stood around the throne and along with the elders and the four living creatures, they fell face down before the throne and worshipped God saying, Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and strength.

Be to our God forever and ever. Amen. Then one of the elders asked me, who are these people in white robes and where did they come from? I said to him, sir, you know? Then he told me, they are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.

[19 : 31] They washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Okay, so John hears about this finite number of God's people.

Because God, from the heavenly perspective, God knows how many people are His in the world. And how many people will be His at the day of the Lord. But from the earthly perspective, they're a vast multitude and they're not just Israel.

They're from every nation that no one can count. This is, in fact, the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, isn't it? Remember the covenant promise that you'll be the father of many nations and your descendants will be like the stars of the sky.

You won't be able to count them. But what we discover is that the covenant people represented by Israel, what John hears, are here people from every nation.

So, they're included in God's sealed people, not because of their ethnic identity, or not because of what they've done, but for one reason and one reason only. What is that reason that they're included in the people of God?

[20 : 36] The Lamb. Thank you, Lorraine. Verse 14, look at it again. They washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. I don't know if you've done any washing recently.

Generally, if you try to use blood to wash something, it doesn't come out white. But again, it's a symbol. What does it talk about? It talks about the atonement that Jesus secured for His people on the cross when He died and He shed His blood.

Because of who He was, He was able, His death, taking the judgment of God, was able to pay for the sins of His people for the sealed. And so, that sorts out why the sealed can survive the day of wrath, the day of judgment, because they have washed their robes symbolically in the blood of the Lamb.

They have trusted in Jesus Christ. That is the sealed people of God, the 144,000. All those from any nation throughout the ages who have trusted truly in Jesus Christ.

But, we learn something more about them. They didn't just trust in Jesus Christ. They made that trust known. They shouted it from the rooftops.

[21 : 45] Look at verse 10 again. Very important. They cried out in a loud voice, Salvation belongs to our God, who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb.

That's a really good summary of evangelism right there. That is the message that the church exists to make known. That God is on the throne.

Our God, the God of the Bible, is the one in command. He has all authority. He calls the shots. And salvation from our sins comes alone from Him in the Lamb.

And nowhere else. And no other religion. That is the message of Christianity. And that is the second characteristic of the sealed of God, is that they make that message known. Do you see that? They shouted out loud.

Not softly. They cried out in a loud voice. Not softly and timidly only on a Sunday in church. But they were unashamed to cry out these truths to whoever would listen to them.

[22 : 48] They published the truth that God is on the throne. And God and the Lamb. And from them alone is salvation. And so our job, if we are the sealed of God, if we are God's people, if we call ourselves Christians, our job is to make known on earth the praises of God in heaven.

The praises of God that are going on right now in heaven, and declaring who He is, and celebrating that fact, our job, because we are caught up in that interaction, that overlap between heaven and earth, our job is to take those praises and make them known on earth as well.

Make these truths, these realities known on earth. And that is what marks out the people of God. And that is why they fight with some strange weapons.

So John hears this great army that is being prepared to go through the wilderness, and go through tribulation and fight. And so he turns around. What does he expect? He expects to see this army holding shields and brandishing these great swords.

But what does he see them holding instead? Verse 9. Standing before the throne, for the Lamb, they were clothed in white, with palm branches in their hands.

[24 : 01] Now, anybody here try to fight with a palm branch? It's probably just going to irritate your enemy more than anything else. But that's, it's a weird thing for this army of God to be holding.

Palm branches. Now, what's the significance and the symbolism of palm branches? Well, guess what? You find out in the Old Testament. Okay? So, I'll summarize it for you. When God's people were going through the wilderness, they had temporary shelters, but when they got back to the land, they established a feast.

Actually, God established the feast called the Feast of Tabernacles, where once a year, the Jews from all over Israel would gather, and they would take palm branches and build temporary shelters for themselves to commemorate God bringing them through their trials, bringing them through their tribulation.

And so the palm branches symbolized their memory of God's provision for them and protection of them. But then we know as Christians, there's something else that palm branches signify, isn't it?

The arrival of Jesus into Jerusalem on a donkey. Palm Sunday we celebrate. Because when Jesus entered triumphantly into Jerusalem, the people who declared Him and recognized Him as the Messiah, as King, what did they do?

[25 : 14] They laid down palm branches, and they waved palm branches as He came in. And so what do palm branches signify? Why are God's people holding them up? Because they're signs in Revelation, which is looking back both on the Old Testament and the Feast of Tabernacles, as well as on Jesus' triumphal entry.

Palm branches are signs of people's trust and recognition of God and His Christ. These are the people who have recognized who Jesus is. These are the people who trust God.

And that is how they fight. That's their weapon. Faith in God and His Messiah. And that is what marks out the sealed of God.

They declare what is true, and they're unashamed to do so. They are the ones described going through the Great Tribulation in Daniel 11.

And now that we know that Daniel 11 is describing God's people going through tribulation in any age, it has more significance. Let me read again from Daniel 11 from verse 32.

[26 : 23] The people who know their God during this Great Tribulation will be strong and take action. Those who have insight among the people will give them understanding, will give understanding to many, yet they will fall by the sword and flame and be captured and plundered for a time.

This is talking about God's people in every age who are unashamed to stand up and declare truth in a world that is waging war against them. And in a way, that's happening in our generation.

Not, thankfully, in a war of violence just yet, but it's a social war, a cultural war that is happening around us. The world is becoming more and more weakly, intolerant of what the Bible says about God's rule in this world, particularly the area of sexuality today.

They're intolerant of God's people declaring, praise be to our God who sits on the throne. This is the God who gets to call the shots in the world. This is the God who gets to say what's right and wrong, not us.

We don't get to define who we are and what our lives mean and what our significance is. God does. God gets to define how we use our bodies, not us. That's just one aspect of this truth being declared that the true people of God today are declaring about Him, that He is the one who sits on the throne and the world doesn't want to hear us.

[27 : 47] And the world is waging war against that truth. And it's tempting God's people to compromise the covenant today, to compromise truth. As we heard in the warning to the church in Pergamum just this week, right?

They were warned not to compromise the truth as they were going through great tribulation. And Smyrna as well. Well, the seal of God, those who will survive the day of the Lord, are those who because of being truly redeemed, they don't shrink back from that.

But they, as Daniel says, take action. And they do that by giving understanding to many, by being unashamed to declare the truth that they know about God, even when falling by the sword and flame.

Because they are the ones gathered in true worship. And they can't stop crying out in a loud voice to whoever's willing to hear, salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

Let's pray. Lord, we pray that we would be those people included in the seal of God. People who are unashamed.

[28 : 56] to declare the truth about you, to join in heaven, praising you for who you are and what you've done. Help us, Lord, no matter what pressures we face, to keep quiet.

Help us to be a people who declare that you sit on the throne and to you alone is salvation. And would you save many people through that testimony in Jesus' name.

Amen.