

The Grace of Wrath

Studies in the Revelation of Jesus Christ

Text

Chapter 7:1-8 & 14:1-5; 7:9-17

Topic

The 144,000 are sealed by God to survive the Tribulation while sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ

Title

"Seal Team 144,000"

Introduction

We love our military and civilian special forces. As Will Smith insightfully stated in *Men in Black*, "They're the best of the best of the best, Sir."

God has a thing for special *spiritual* forces:

- Gideon was chosen to fight against an army of Midianites. He started with 32,000 Israeli soldiers, but God said that was too many, and sent home 10,000. Twenty-two thousand was still too many, so God further whittled it down to an elite 300.
- Before he was king, David attracted a band of men, around thirty strong, who were called his Mighty Men.
- Jesus had His original twelve disciples as an elite force; and, in Luke's Gospel, He appointed another group of seventy-two for a special assignment.

Our text in the Revelation will present to us a very prominent special forces group in the future seven-year Tribulation. They are "the 144,000."

We will see that they are untouchable, while tasked with preaching the Gospel to everyone on the planet.

We will also see some of the result of their preaching by being introduced to another group, the Tribulation martyrs.

As we look at both groups, as an application to us, we'll say that sometimes our testimony is best served by being *kept through* our trouble; whereas, other times, our testimony is best served by being *taken by* our trouble.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 God May Determine That Your Testimony Is Most Powerful When You Are Kept Through Trouble, or #2 God May Determine That Your Testimony Is Most Powerful When You Are Taken By Trouble.

#1 God May Determine That Your Testimony
Is Most Powerful When You Are Kept Through Trouble

(7:1-8 & 14:1-5)

We are in the Tribulation.

In our text, I mean; not us.

Chapters six through eighteen of the Revelation describe the future, seven-year Tribulation in detail.

It begins, in Heaven, when Jesus takes a seven-sealed scroll from His Father and opens the seals, one-by-one.

He opened the first six seals in chapter six, and we said that they span approximately the first three-and-one-half years of the Tribulation.

Jesus will open the seventh seal in verse one of chapter eight. It reveals a series of seven trumpets being blown.

When the seventh trumpet is blown in chapter eleven, a series of seven bowls full of the wrath of God are poured-out upon the earth in chapter sixteen.

Just as the seven seals take us through the first half of the Tribulation, the trumpets and the bowls take us through the last half of the Tribulation, increasing in frequency and intensity as the days tick by.

The chapters in-between fill-in the blanks, letting us know what is happening on the earth as a result of the seals, trumpets, and bowls.

In chapters seven and fourteen we will see events at the beginning of the Tribulation; during the Tribulation; and at the end of the Tribulation.

The story of the 144,000, inserted here, is God's way of reminding us of His grace during the Tribulation. He goes on reaching out to those who are perishing, and millions are saved.

Rev 7:1 After these things I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, on the sea, or on any tree.

Rev 7:2 Then I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God. And he cried with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea,

Rev 7:3 saying, "Do not harm the earth, the sea, or the trees till we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads."

Since all believers from this present age will have been suddenly and miraculously removed by the rapture, new witnesses must be raised up immediately.

How can we know these servants are sealed early in the Tribulation? The "harm" against the earth that is being held back can be associated with the blowing of the first trumpet. Since the first trumpet sounds *after* the seventh seal is opened, these servants must be sealed sometime before that, putting it in the first half of the Tribulation.

Further, in chapter six we saw Tribulation martyrs as the fifth seal was opened. Since it's reasonable to assume the Tribulation martyrs got saved, at least some of them, by the preaching of these sealed servants, they must have already been at work *before* the fifth seal was opened.

Sometime before the opening of the fifth seal, which is during the early days of the Tribulation, is when these servants of God will be "sealed."

Their sealing means they will be supernaturally protected during the Tribulation on the earth. They will be untouchable, invincible.

There has been much useless speculation throughout history as to the true identity of these who are sealed.

- The Jehovah's Witnesses claim that certain members of their cult are the true 144,000.
- Others teach that the English speaking people of Europe are the 144,000, having descended from dispersed Jews who settled in Europe after the Assyrians conquered Israel.
- Others teach that the term "144,000" is a code name for the church.

We are told explicitly who they are:

Rev 7:4 And I heard the number of those who were sealed. One hundred *and* forty-four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel *were* sealed:

The 144,000 are exactly who God says they are - 12,000 each from the twelve tribes listed here of the Jews living on the earth during the Tribulation.

Rev 7:5 of the tribe of Judah twelve thousand *were* sealed; of the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand *were* sealed; of the tribe of Gad twelve thousand *were* sealed;

Rev 7:6 of the tribe of Asher twelve thousand *were* sealed; of the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand *were* sealed; of the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand *were* sealed;

Rev 7:7 of the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand *were* sealed; of the tribe of Levi twelve thousand *were* sealed; of the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand *were* sealed;

Rev 7:8 of the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand *were* sealed; of the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand *were* sealed; of the tribe of Benjamin twelve thousand *were* sealed.

Some things to notice about this list, in no particular order:

1. First, both Joseph and his son Manasseh are mentioned, while his other son, Ephraim, is not.
2. Second, the tribe of Dan is omitted altogether.
3. And third, the tribe of Levi is included, whose place in the Old Testament listings, along with Joseph's, is regularly taken by Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh.

Nowhere in the Bible is there any commentary on the particulars of this list of the tribes. Anything else I, or anyone else, might say, is sheer speculation. Only God knows why these twelve tribes, in this order.

What is important is that we understand that these are 12,000 physical descendants of Abraham from each of these twelve tribes.

How do they get saved? Probably much the same as Saul of Tarsus (Paul) was miraculously brought to faith on the road to Damascus.

Sometimes they are called "144,000 Billy Graham's." With no disrespect to Billy, **they are 144,000 Paul the apostle's.**

By the way: Have you heard that the Gospel must be preached to every creature before the Lord can return?

When Jesus told His disciples "this Gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come," He was describing Gospel preaching that would take place *after* the resurrection and rapture of the church and *during* the Tribulation on the earth.

The 144,000 will be a big part of that campaign. How can we be sure? Because we read about them, again, in chapter fourteen.

Rev 14:1 Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads.

He saw Jesus. "Lamb" is the favorite name for Him in this book.

Mount Zion is on earth. This is an earthly scene. It is the Second Coming of Jesus at the end of the seven years. There the 144,000 will gather to Him and then accompany Him into the Millennial Kingdom on the earth.

Don't overlook the fact that at the end of the Tribulation their number is intact. Not one of them was lost, either to apostasy or to martyrdom.

It reads as if everyone can see their seals. This is a visible marking.

We might have a bumper-sticker on our car. Or wear something with a cross or a fish. We might get a tattoo.

Even if we don't 'mark' ourselves, we are said to be spiritually sealed with the Holy Spirit. He dwells within us as a promise God will keep us, and finish the work He has begun in Us. We, too, are marked men and women.

We should always think of ourselves as representing the Lord. Let's remember that and conduct ourselves as befitting our Lord and our Father.

Rev 14:2 And I heard a voice from heaven, like the voice of many waters, and like the voice of loud thunder. And I heard the sound of harpists playing their harps.

We showed you that the "harps" are really what we would call guitars. Let's jam.

These sounds coming "from Heaven" will be the soundtrack for the singing of verse three.

Think of certain movies you love, and you'll realize the soundtrack played an extremely important role telling the story.

Rev 14:3 They sang as it were a new song before the throne, before the four living creatures, and the elders; and no one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth.

We've seen these characters "before the throne," before:

- The "four living creatures" are a type of angel, whose joy and job it is to worship the Lord day and night.
- The "elders" are the church - resurrected and raptured and safe in Heaven prior to the Tribulation.

Don't the 144,000 need to be in Heaven to be singing "before the throne?"

I don't see why. Whenever we sing, isn't it to God? Aren't we before Him? Doesn't He hear it before His throne?

The 144,000 are on the earth with Jesus, on Mount Zion, at His Second Coming. Heaven is providing a live soundtrack for a song they sing.

It's a "new song." God is preparing a lot of new music for the return of Jesus.

As for our untouchables, "no one could learn that song" except them. They were "redeemed from the earth," saved by grace through faith, as is always the case. But it's clear they are a very distinct, very unique group, among all those who are saved.

Rev 14:4 These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins...

The first part of the verse seems to describe their career on the earth *during* the Tribulation. The fact they "were not defiled with women" seems to argue for their all being men. As to sexual activity they are said to be "virgins."

Think about it: These guys are untouchable by the forces of evil but that would not extend to a wife and family. They are better off without those relationships, in the Tribulation.

Rev 14:4 These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb.

When you read that "they follow the Lamb wherever He goes" it looks forward to their work in the kingdom on the earth Jesus will establish.

Talk about a posse.

“These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb.”

The firstfruits are always the promise of a greater harvest. This is one hint that they go about evangelizing.

Rev 14:5 And in their mouth was found no deceit, for they are without fault before the throne of God.

Of course you'd expect them to be without “deceit” or “fault.” Why point it out?

“Deceit” can be translated “lie.” It's a word that can be associated with idols and idolatry. The reign of the antichrist is characterized by lies and idolatry. In fact, we read in Second Thessalonians that there is something called “the lie” that people who follow the antichrist will believe (2:11).

The 144,000 never waver. There is no compromise at all in them. Not only do they all make it through to the end, they do so without being broken by the pressures exerted on them.

The 144,000 are also said to be “without fault.” It could be translated “without blemish.” Jews were familiar with the phrase as describing the quality of the sacrifices that were worthy of being brought to God.

There, standing with the Lamb of God Who was without blemish in His sacrifice on the Cross, are 144,000 followers without blemish. Like Lamb, like little lambs.

Of course, in Ephesians we're told that the church will also be without spot or blemish. It is God's great joy to perfect us, over time on earth, and then all at once in eternity.

These verses are strictly and wholly about the 144,000. **That doesn't mean we cannot find application.**

One application for us is simple, but deep. God can preserve us, without harm, through our trouble. He will, if that is what yields the most powerful testimony.

In other words, our lives - sealed though we are - are meant to affect others for Jesus.

#2 God May Determine That Your Testimony Is Most Powerful When You Are Taken By Trouble

(7:9-17)

The 144,000 bring the Gospel to every nation, tribe, people, and tongue on the face of the earth. It will be a time of great spiritual harvest as innumerable multitudes believe the Gospel and are saved.

Let's meet them - the Tribulation martyrs.

Revelation 7:9 After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands,

It's wonderful that God is no respecter of persons. People from every ethnicity and from all over the planet will be saved.

They "were standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes..." This is the throne in Heaven.

"White robes" are the spiritual clothing of a believer. When you trust Jesus Christ He takes off your filthy garments of your own personal works of righteousness and gives you His righteousness instead.

"With palm branches in their hands..." *It will be Palm Sunday.* Jesus will come forth, from Heaven, and the kingdom will become a reality.

Some commentators suggest, and I agree with them, that it may be the Feast of Tabernacles when Jesus returns. During Tabernacles, Jews are instructed to build a temporary structure in which to eat their meals, entertain guests, relax, and even sleep. The tabernacles, or booths, are reminiscent of the type of huts in which the ancient Israelites dwelt during their forty years of wandering in the desert.

Jesus fulfilled all the spring feasts, in His first coming, on the very calendar days they occurred. We took an extended look at this for our Christmas service in 2014; I'd encourage you to go to the website and listen to it, or read it, if you're interested in God's calendar.

The fall feasts that have not yet been fulfilled by Jesus are Trumpets and Tabernacles, which correspond to the Tribulation (Trumpets), and the Second Coming (Tabernacles).

We shouldn't set dates. **But God has set dates**, on the Jewish calendar.

Rev 7:10 and crying out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation *belongs* to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

"Salvation belongs to... God" in the sense it is only available as a gift from Him. It is on account of Jesus taking the place of the sacrificial "Lamb" that we can receive salvation as God's gift.

Revelation 7:11 All the angels stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, and fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,

Revelation 7:12 saying: "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom, Thanksgiving and honor and power and might, *Be* to our God forever and ever. Amen."

"All the angels" will be there. We've said before that the "elders" are the church age believers. The "four living creatures" are angels, too.

A few characteristics of God and Jesus are mentioned. We might want to check our worship to be sure it has those elements.

- Do our songs of praise reveal God's "glory," "wisdom," "honor," "power," and "might?"
- Are they full of "blessing" and "thanksgiving?"

Rev 7:13 Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?"

John gets hit with a pop-quiz. He's understandably ignorant of who they are.

Rev 7:14 And I said to him, "Sir, you know." So he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

Lamb's "blood" is a 'dye' that turns your filthy garment white. Without the shedding of blood there can be no remission of sins. With it you stand clothed for eternity.

Notice, they come "out of the great Tribulation," meaning we are right in saying that this is a scene at the end of the seven years.

The antichrist is given power "to make war with the saints [who come to Christ during the Tribulation], and to overcome [kill] them" (13:7). We've already see their souls "under the altar" in Heaven asking when they will be avenged (6:9-10). They are told they must wait "until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled" (v 11).

Rev 7:15 Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple.

The reward for serving the Lord is - *more serving*.

There is no retirement from the things of the Lord. No slacking off. You should be doing more-and-more.

Rev 7:15 ...And He who sits on the throne will dwell among them.

The greatest reward of all is to be in the presence of Jesus. You have His presence now. You and I, individually and corporately, are the Temple of His Holy Spirit.

Thus no matter where I serve, and no matter the sacrifice or the suffering or even the worldly shame, I can be content and filled with joy as I do everything with the Lord.

If there is one 'key' to the Christian life it is knowing and then practicing the presence of God.

Rev 7:16 They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat;

We're not really told when the Tribulation martyrs receive their resurrection bodies; but they will have been raised prior to the Second Coming, because we know that, when the Lord returns in His Second Coming, He returns with "all" His saints (First Thessalonians 3:13).

"Hunger," "heat," and "thirst" describe some of their previous sufferings during the Tribulation. During the last half of the Tribulation you will not be able to buy or sell anything unless you swear allegiance to the antichrist.

All of that will be over, forever.

Rev 7:17 for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Though *servants*, they are also *sheep*, and Jesus will "shepherd them." They will be completely satisfied, both physically and emotionally.

"Living fountains of waters" refers to their physical state. People speak of and seek the fountain of youth.

It's a parody of the true fountains that are available to sustain you in a relationship with Jesus Christ.

"God will wipe away every tear" refers to their emotional state. More than just never crying again, God will heal every emotional wound and pain once-for-all.

As much as the 144,000 will be kept from harm, the Tribulation martyrs will not be.

It's reminiscent of the faith chapter, Hebrews eleven, where the heroes in the first half were delivered from trouble, while those in the second half were, in some cases, sawn in half.

Why, in the Book of Acts, was James arrested and beheaded, but Peter arrested and miraculously delivered from prison?

Only God knows. But both of them had a powerful testimony; and, eventually, they both arrived at the same eternal destination.

Does the road matter that much, when the destination is the same?

Not in the long run that we are on as witnesses.