

Mystery of the 144k

Tools for Interpretation

Revelation 7

Raise your hand if you were here last week for our study on the 5th and 6th seal from Revelation 6. I'm glad you came back, that was a heavy one. Those 2 seals contain the heavy language describing followers of Jesus who will be killed during the Great Tribulation, and then the catastrophic events of the sun turning black, stars falling to the earth, the sky split apart and rolled up, and fear before the sight of Jesus the Lamb of God. I believe what we read serves as a warning- a heads up for us as followers of Jesus- to be prepared, to persevere, to remain strong- but I encouraged us to focus on what is written at the bottom of our study guide: the world becoming the Kingdom of Jesus, reward for His followers, the temple in Heaven opened, overcoming Satan and his demons, victory over the beast, the evil forces in this world being stopped, Jesus appearing in the sky, ruling with Jesus in His Kingdom, experiencing the River of Life, healing fruit trees, eating from the Tree of Life, entering into the new city, His coming reward. These realities are what every chapter of Revelation is pointing us toward.

And so instead of laying things out in chronological order, Jesus gave John this Revelation in bite size pieces- in layers- and in-between the layers Jesus inserts reminders of these coming realities very often. And today we get to look at one such instance of a reminder of where things are headed. So we get a break from the gloom and doom today- everyone go "whew" with me: "whewww..." But we also have some cryptic language to figure out, and we're going to wrestle back and forth a little bit with how to interpret some of what is being said, and what I want you to take note of today is the process, logic, strategy, for weighing different views of interpretation. Obviously many pastors, teachers, translators, book authors carry with them different views on theology, on Bible interpretation, and especially different views on the

book of Revelation- and it's best that you take whatever teaching is being presented, including teaching from Pastor Dave and myself, and learn how to measure it against the rest of scripture and against other views. So I'll going to talk a lot about that today as well. Let's go ahead and get into it- starting with the first 3 verses in chapter 7... **(Rev 7:1-3)**

Ok, first thing we need to note here is that the progression through the seals has been interrupted. We had listed the 1st through the 6th seals all in a row, and now we have this whole chapter with seal number 7 not mentioned until the next chapter. It seems to me that there is an intentional pause taking place here- an interlude. We'll see later in this chapter, there's encouragement inserted here to refocus our attention from the doom, back to the end result victory for Jesus and His followers. Again, this isn't written in chronological order- we just got finished reading in chapter 6 that the sun goes black and that the Earth will be catastrophically harmed by stars falling on it and that every mountain and island gets removed from it's place- and so this, in mentioning the sun rising in verse 2 and the command not to harm the earth in verse 3, this passage is stepping out of the progression we were previously in, we're stepping out of time now and getting explained to us a general concept that applies to the 3.5 year timeframe of the Great Tribulation.

Let's check out some details here, in verse 1 it says John saw 4 angels standing at the 4 corners of the earth- that doesn't mean the Earth is a flat rectangle, that's just Biblical language conveying that whatever these 4 angels are doing- it will affect the *entire* Earth. And they're holding back the wind. This seems to convey further the idea of this being a pause, an outside of timeline type thing we're supposed to notice. If you're outside and it's windy, and all of a sudden the wind stops- everything stops moving and stands still- that moment could easily give you an eerie feeling that everything is pausing for something big that is about to happen. Almost like the eye of a hurricane type

thing, there's a pause, a stillness, before something more intense continues.

Verse 2 says John sees an angel, a different one, ascending from the rising of the sun. So there's a new angel, rising with the sun- the rising of the sun indicates a new day, there's like this glimmer of hope, a new start being presented that interrupts where we were with the gloom and doom of the 5th and 6th seal. And He's holding the *seal* of the living God. 1-6 seals of the book (or scroll) have already been described as having been broken, resulting in bad earthly events, and there's one more coming- the 7th one, it's presented in chapter 8- and to me that 7th seal that we'll see later next week, sounds maybe even like complete destruction- fire is hurled to the Earth. But before that is described we are introduced to the *seal of God*. Like, we're all a little on edge about the gloom and doom of the 7 seals described, and God knowing that is like: "Hey- while we're on the subject of *bad* seals, let me pause and offer you hope and tell you about my *good* seal."

And this seal is described as being put on the foreheads of God's bond-servants. Bond-servant is the term Paul used in His letters, referring to himself, and the meaning is one who has fully committed themselves *willingly* to their Master, Jesus Christ. A bond-servant was one who was not just a hired worker, nor a captured slave, but one who said to their boss, "this is my place in life, I willingly want to work for you for the rest of my life. You're such an awesome boss, the money is great, and this is such an awesome job that I don't ever want to work for anyone else ever again." That's what a bond-servant means, and it is a very fitting word to describe those of us who have made Jesus our King, our boss. We say "Jesus, you are an amazing boss, I want to make living on mission for You and Your Kingdom work my full time job, Your reward is worth it, I don't ever want another boss- You're it." And the seal given to these bond-servants is most likely *not* a literal wax stamped tattoo on the forehead, but the meaning is probably figurative,

spiritual. Here's our first example I want to give you of how to give weight to different interpretations.

I don't know of any teachers or groups who take this verse literally, but just for example sake, we can't decide how to interpret the Bible solely on what feels right, or on what our preference would be. We can't be like, "I personally don't want a wax stamp on my forehead, therefore that can't be what this is talking about." No, we have to find something more substantial from which to form our interpretation. And the best way to attempt interpretation is to let the Bible interpret itself. So what we first do is look at the immediate context to see if there are any clues that will help us interpret this seal in a literal or a figurative sense. With a quick scan we can confirm, yes, there are lots of other mentions of seals, and now we have to look at those instances and see if *those* seals are literal or figurative. Here in this context we can clearly see that the seals are not something literal, but they *represent* something, they are symbolic, figurative representations of something *else* that is real—the martyrs, stars falling to earth, the sky rolled up, mountains and islands being moved. So, this should tell us, that most likely, this seal is figurative language representing something else.

Now, before we decide that is definitely the correct interpretation, we need to zoom out further to see if there is any other mention of seals in scripture that might help clarify this passage. So we use a concordance and see what other verses use the word seal, or we web search online something like "seal verses in the Bible," and what we'll find is that in the Old Testament there are several *literal* uses of a seal—a king using his ring to seal a letter, an author commanded by God to seal up the book he is writing, using a seal to confirm an agreement, Noah sealing up the boat with tar pitch to waterproof it; but then in the New Testament, in Ephesians 1 and 2 Corinthians 1, there is mentioned believers in Jesus being "sealed" with God's holy Spirit.

So after looking through all these verses, it probably makes the most sense to consider the New Testament references to help us understand Revelation chapter 7, since all three are talking about *humans* being sealed, rather than objects. So then we think, in what way would humans be sealed by the Holy Spirit- is this literal or figurative? Well, it probably doesn't make much sense for humans to be wax seal stamped- that really wouldn't carry much spiritual value. So we're already thinking figurative because that's more logical, and so the next step would be to then consider in what way would humans be figuratively sealed by the Holy Spirit, a way that is *like* the envelope of a letter being literally sealed. We have to consider the literal idea of how the seal of a letter functions, and then figure out what the figurative, spiritual parallel could be. The literal idea, as I illustrated last week, is: a letter sealed with a wax stamp on the envelope so that it can be verified no one tampered with the letter. And so our conclusion should be that: a believer in Jesus is sealed with the Holy Spirit and therefore it will be verified that no one tampered with them before they reach God the recipient. The seal is a form of protection for the recipient of that which is being sealed. Now maybe that seems like a lot of work, but it's worth it to learn how to let scripture interpret scripture, and once you start using this method more often to approach difficult to understand passages, it becomes easier, faster, and actually kind of fun to research, science out, and solve the mysteries of the Bible. Ok, let's move on to **verse 4** and following, which give us more details about these who are being sealed, and we'll have another interpretation mystery to wrestle with in this passage as well...

And then verses 5-8 go on to tell us the number heard of those sealed is: 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel. Now, there's a lot of varying speculation on what this list means exactly. Right here is a much more significant place where we have to ask the question is this literal or figurative. What is this passage referring to exactly? Well, let's keep reading to look at the immediate context and see if there are any

more clues to help us sort out our understanding. Verse 9 to the end of the chapter... (**v 9-17**)

So after describing 144,000 from tribes of Israel, there is described a larger, *uncountable* multitude from every nation, clothed in white, in the throne room of God, giving words of praise to Him, and then the rest of the beings there in the throne room join in the worship as well. And this has to be an amazing scene, probably John's jaw is dropping at this sight, and I can imagine in **verse 13**, one of the elders (most likely a fellow human), nudges him in the ribs, raises his eyebrows, and says, "Hey John, you know who all these people are?" And John's like "Dude, come on, you know I don't have a clue." So the elder responds that this uncountable multitude from all different tribes, peoples, languages, cultures are people who come out of the great tribulation. And their reward for their repentance before Jesus and allegiance to Jesus- is that they get to live forever in the throne room of God, protected by Him, they never have to hunger or thirst, never have to deal with the heat of the day, they'll be led by Jesus, they get to drink from the water of life, their sadness will be permanently wiped away.

Now, the language being used here doesn't necessarily seem to indicate that this giant multitude is *just* the believers who die during -or survive through- the 3.5 year great tribulation period. Using scripture to interpret scripture, the rewards described are the same mentioned later on in chapter 21 that the bride of Christ (in other words- all believers in Jesus from all time), will receive. So if that is the sense, if this is referring to all believers from all time, from throughout all history, whether they experience the Great Tribulation or not- then what the elder means in saying "they are the ones who come out of the great tribulation," that would need to be taken as these are the ones who remain after the Great Tribulation. The sense would be: After the time of tribulation ends, these are the result, or the idea would be a sense of general solidarity from Christians throughout history with the Christians

who endure through the tribulation. I think this makes the most sense, and most scholars agree that this is referring generally to the entire bride of Christ, the Church, true Christian followers of Jesus from all of time.

Now, as I mentioned, what is a little less clear, is who the previous 144,000 are being referred to as. Let me start off with telling you what I think we can confidently say they are *not*. Jehovah's Witnesses take this passage and determine that only 144,000 people total, from all time, will be able to experience Heaven with Jesus in His Kingdom. The rest of "good" Jehovah Witnesses only have what they call an "earthly hope," that means they will inhabit a paradise on earth that is ruled by Jesus and the 144,000. There's a bit of a cast system arranged- you got the 144k special people who get the really nice setup in Heaven, and if you don't make that cut, then there's the semi-decent option of the nice neighborhood on Earth. We can cross that idea off the list, the passage does not indicate that in it's direct context, nor do we have any notion of that mentioned anywhere else in scripture; in fact we have quite the opposite- the Bible is filled with language supporting the fact that *all* followers of Jesus get to be with Jesus in Heaven- and it's not based on their own good merit, but based only on the merit of the One in whom they place their faith- Jesus Christ.

Michael Heiser, who I respect very much as a great teacher and scholar, imagines these to be a distinct group of glorified, angelized individuals, who are sexually pure, the idea being that this is an undoing, a reversal of what happened with the Nephilim, who are described in Genesis 6 as the children of "sons of God" who came down and had relations with human women. In other words there was a mixed race of sorts, produced by fallen angelic beings who had relations with human women. Michael Heiser suggests perhaps this is a mix race like that again, but this time conceived from good angels mixing with the human race. As much as I respect and appreciate Michael Heiser's

teaching on other subjects, his view is a little “out there” I believe, there’s not any verses in scripture, nor any immediate context here that would connect Genesis 6 to the meaning of Revelation 7.

Some say this 144k are a literal number of Jewish people during the Great Tribulation who perhaps were previously hard-hearted to God, but during the Tribulation will surrender to Jesus and be saved. Maybe- that’s definitely more Biblically supported than what the Jehovah Witnesses say, and what Mr Heiser suggests. We do have several Bible verses that talk about only a small remnant from Judaism will be saved because of turning to Jesus.

Others have a similar take, but more nuanced by indicating that these literal 144k will not only turn to Jesus and be saved, but the idea is that they are chosen to be witnesses for Jesus during the Tribulation. I was originally most drawn to this idea, and have noted that concept in your study guide, but I’m not 100% convinced quite yet. There is some language in chapter 14 that could push us in that direction, but it’s not clearly stated. After looking at this repetitively over time, I’m currently leaning towards a different, more figurative interpretation that I’ll explain in a moment.

But before I do, it is interesting to note that currently the Messianic Church worldwide is said to have around 300,000 ish participants. Likely, more than half of that number are Gentile believers, who just enjoy going to a Messianic Jewish Church. So if we don’t include them in our counting, perhaps there are currently in the world about 144,000 ish followers of Jesus who are of Jewish ancestry. Obviously we have to be cautious with these types of assessments and not give them too much weight as we are forming our theology- scripture definitely needs to weigh more in swaying our opinions- but that statistic is an interesting one worth noting.

There are many teachers currently who suggest that this group of 144k is really one and the same as the next group, the great multitude. The idea would be to take this passage very figuratively, symbolically, and thus note that believers in Jesus, whether of Jewish DNA or culture, and believers of any other DNA or culture will all join Jesus in His throne room after the Great Tribulation and time on Earth wraps up. In other words the 144,000 is just a symbolic number, a number of completion, kind of like the number 7, and thus 144,000 is just symbolically representing all Christians throughout history, whether Jew or Gentile. The idea would be that John *hears* the number mentioned- 144,000 in **verse 4**, and so he *looks* in **verse 9**, and what he sees is a multitude that no one can count from all nations. In other words he *hears* something said (144,000 from Israel) and then he is given the sight to explain what he has heard. As in, what he sees *answers*, it *interprets*, it *explains* what he just heard- the 144k from Israel is explained as multitudes from every nation. This interpretation really grew on me this week, but I'm still open to the more literal, Tribulation witnesses idea.

If we zoom out a little further and note other similar passages, we'll see that in Genesis 49 there is a list of the sons of Jacob (whose name was changed to Israel). In Genesis the oldest son is listed first, Reuben, but instead here we see that Judah is mentioned first- the tribe Jesus was humanly related to- the tribe that it was prophesied in Genesis that the ruling scepter would not depart from. Also the tribe of Dan is not listed, and in it's place is one of Joseph's sons- Manasseh. The book of Judges tells us that the tribe of Dan abandoned the Lord for idols, and so perhaps that is why they are not included in this list, and could be a reason to see this list as being more figurative than literal.

We also have later on in Revelation chapter 14, these 144,000 mentioned again, and there is some further description of them, but this time it appears they are with Jesus. In chapter 7 here it's clear these 144k are on Earth, but in chapter 14 the description says they're

worshiping in song before God's throne- they've passed from the Earth into Heaven. This still *could* fit either a literal or a figurative interpretation. If we're going with the literal *witness* interpretation, then it seems these 144k died during the Great Tribulation, perhaps from persecution or perhaps from the catastrophic events taking place. The "seal" on their forehead would thus not mean 100% protection from any bad thing that happened, but rather the "seal" would be the same seal that is mentioned elsewhere, that I mentioned earlier, that applies to any believer- the seal of the Holy Spirit- the proof that no one can tamper with their position before God, before God the recipient receives them. The witness idea could make sense here too, because after the description in chapter 14, it says that an angel comes to preach the gospel (as a witness) to those on the earth, right before Babylon is judged and the entire earth is harvested. This would show God's mercy, and his ultimate goal through the difficult events of the Tribulation- that the people who have yet to receive Jesus as King, would hopefully do so. If the 144k witnesses are killed off, God in His mercy -before He harvests the entire Earth and there is no longer opportunity to make an earthly decision for Him as King- before the end, God sends an angelic witness now that the 144k witnesses are gone, in order to have His message of salvation still being proclaimed to those on Earth.

If the 144k are to be viewed more *symbolically* as representing all believers in Jesus from all time, then chapter 14 serves as another focus on the end result of being sealed with God's seal while here on earth, and when we pass from this earth- whether through the natural course of life on earth, or whether as a result of the events and persecution that occurs during the Tribulation- either way the end result is being with Jesus in Heaven, joyfully singing thanks and praise for all the good things God will bless us with.

Verses 4 and 5 of chapter 14 are worth noting as we wrestle with this... **(Rev 14:4-5)**

Ok, so the 144k are described here as virgins. If we take the number 144,000 literally- like there are literally 12,000 from 12 different Jewish Tribes- then we would also probably need to take this verse literally as well and assume the 144k to only be men, who have never been with a woman. Some of the ladies in the room are now like, hey, maybe in this case it's better to take that 144k number figuratively as representing the whole church, so that we can also take this verse as being figurative and not exclude women- figuratively as in believers of Jesus are pure, God sees us as a spotless bride, we are received by Jesus untainted. But then, the verse continues and says these 144k *"have been purchased from mankind as first fruits to God and to the Lamb."* This is probably another significant clue.

We should zoom out and see what the rest of the Bible says concerning this term "first fruit." After a simple search, we would see that "first fruit" comes from the Old Testament command for the Israelites to bring to God an offering, from some of the first crops that would come up from the ground. In other words, God told the people- when you plant seed to grow your gardens for food, after watering the seeds, weeding the garden, waiting for things to grow, after all that- when you harvest those first few crops, when the first few tomatoes turn red, when the first few apples are ready to be picked off the tree- bring those "first fruits" to the Priests as an offering to God, and as a means of providing for the Priests who didn't own land and gardens. Then in the New Testament, Paul says this *"Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep."* (1 Cor 15:20) In other words, Jesus was the first to be harvested from the dead into eternal life. As we saw with the word seal, very often the Old Testament presents a literal concept, that the New Testament presents as a more universal figurative, spiritual concept.

In understanding this Biblical phrase "first fruit," let's now apply it back to both of our working theories. For a literal 144k interpretation,

perhaps they are first-fruits in the sense that they are witnesses during the tribulation and they are some of the very first to be killed and harvested as first-fruits, before the harvesting of all the rest of the world that is described at the end of chapter 14.

For our more universal, symbolic 144k interpretation, perhaps they are first-fruits in the sense that when we read the end of chapter 14, it's all the believers who are harvested *first*, and then those destined for judgement are harvested next. In other words, the believers in a general sense are the first ones harvested (the first fruits)- they are part of the first resurrection that is later mentioned in Revelation 20, those whom the 2nd death (2nd harvesting) will have no power over.

Let me know after the service, or later this week which interpretation you think seems to be more Biblically supported- the literal interpretation or the figurative interpretation. Either way, my hope for you is that you would have a hunger to personally explore the mysteries of God's word. And hopefully today you were able to put some more tools in your tool belt to help you wrestle with understanding God's word and help you discern through all the various opinions out there that you might encounter. Here at One Church, a major part of what is built into the DNA of our community, is the idea of unity under the banner of Jesus Christ and under the standard of His word. And yet we very much welcome interactive respectful debate and the exchanging of ideas, that are arrived to from letting scripture interpret scripture. I've given you an example this morning not only of how to search for good interpretation through letting scripture interpret scripture, but I've also shown in this example, that there could be two different, yet equally Biblically supported interpretations, and in those cases, we must each very humbly hold loosely to our preferred interpretation. There are subjects, theological ideas, end times interpretations that the Bible clearly supports through various scriptures, and then there are some that are a little more cryptic and could be seen from a few different views- and with

these we remain patient, asking for God to give more insight as we wait for the day that we will be in His Kingdom with direct access to all of His wisdom. In the meantime, let's ask God for His wisdom; for good remembrance, hunger, and understanding of what is contained in His word; and for sharpening conversations with one another that encourage us and draw us closer to Him and to each other.