

## The Revelation of Jesus Christ 7:1-8 Sermon Notes

### Who are the 144,000?

Commentators and scholars differ widely on how to identify the 144,000 who are sealed in Revelation 7:1-8. Some view this as a literal, future group of Jews, while others see the group more figuratively to varying degrees. I believe there are compelling clues within the text to take a more figurative reading, both of the number "144,000" and of the people's identity. Let us consider each in turn.

### 144,000 = The Large, Complete Number of God's People

First, the number 144,000 is very likely a symbolic number. We've already seen how numbers in Revelation usually carry a figurative force. The number seven repeatedly connotes completeness and totality, as does the number four. The twenty-four elders likely represent the entirety of believers in both Old and New Testaments, being a symbolic combination of the twelve tribes of Israel plus the twelve apostles.

This pair of twelves appear again in 144,000, except now multiplied rather than added ( $12 \times 12 = 144$ ). The number 144 is further multiplied by 1,000, which connotes a great or vast amount, like the thousands of angels around the throne of God (Rev 5:11). So the number is likely figurative and intended to communicate a large throng.

### Those Sealed from the Tribes of Israel = Believers in Jesus Christ

Who then are these "144,000" who are sealed? Again, there is strong evidence for interpreting this group of people who come from the "tribes of Israel" figuratively, as representing all believers in Jesus Christ. Consider the following:

1. Figurative Nature of Revelation - First, we've seen repeatedly that Revelation makes heavy use of images and symbols. This should lead us at the very least to be open to a figurative understanding of the people from the tribes of Israel.
2. Who Can Stand? - Our text follows immediately after a vision of the final judgment (6:12-17), which ends with the

question, "Who can stand?" (6:17). The sealing of the 144,000 provides the answer the question left hanging in the preceding vision: Those sealed can stand. Since we know that all who belong to Christ are those who stand in the final judgment, it seems very probable that the 144,000 are a symbol for Jesus' redeemed followers.

3. 12x12 - As already mentioned above, the fact that 144 is the product of 12x12 suggests that the people in view are all God's people, including New Testament believers.
4. The Tribe of Judah Leads - Interestingly the tribe of Judah leads the list, which is fairly uncommon in the Old Testament. This may seem strange, until we remember that Jesus is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah (5:5). The placement of Judah first, in light of Jesus' title, again likely emphasizes that these are followers of Christ (see 14:4). And speaking of tribes, where is Dan in this list? And what is the tribe of Joseph? These irregularities should tip us off that this list has symbolic overtones.
5. Servants of our God - The text itself explicitly identifies the 144,000. They are called "the servants of our God." The phrase "servants of God" and its variants occur elsewhere in Revelation and always refer to believers, including the original recipients of Revelation (see 1:1; 2:20; 11:18; 19:5; 22:3, 6). Since the original readers are included in the "servants" it is almost impossible that these 144,000 are an exclusively future, Jewish group. The readers themselves are among the sealed servants of God.
6. Chapter 14 - The 144,000 appear again in Revelation 14, and there too we see that they are representative of all Jesus' followers. They are the ones who have been "redeemed from the earth" (14:3) and who have been purchased from among men (14:4). This language has already been used to describe all those who belong to Christ (see 5:9).
7. The Nature of the Seal - What exactly is the seal? Again, Chapter 14 tells us by describing the "144,000 who had his [the Lamb's] name and his Father's name written on their foreheads" (14:1). The seal is God's name, like the high priest in the Old Testament who wore a golden plate on his forehead inscribed with the words, "Holy to Yahweh." We're told repeatedly in Revelation that believers will bear the name of God (see 3:12; 22:4). Taken together, this again strongly suggests the 144,000 are a picture of all believers.
8. The Mark of the Beast - Believers are not the only ones who get an identifying mark on their foreheads. Those who

worship the beast bear his mark, which again is a name, this time the name of the Beast (see 14:11). Thus there seem to be two spiritual identities in Revelation, both of which are signified by the picture of a mark on the forehead. Either one worships the Lamb and bears his name, or one worships the counterfeit lamb, the Beast, and bears his name. The point then, for our discussion, is that the seal applies to all believers, suggesting again that the 144,000 symbolize all Christians.

If the 144,000 who are sealed from all the tribes of Israel represent all believers, including the original readers of Revelation, then why are they described as "Israelites?"

That question leads into an enormous field of discussion that exceeds the scope of this handout. But the short answer to the question is that in the New Testament, true Israel has been redefined as all those who belong to Jesus, the Messiah of Israel. Jesus fulfilled all the hopes, institutions and offices of Israel. And so now to belong to "Israel," one must come to Christ. Ethnicity no longer defines the people of God. What matters is no longer being culturally Jew or Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised (Romans 2:28-29; Galatians 6:15), but rather what matters is whether or not one belongs to Jesus through faith in him. Jesus and his people are true Israel.

This explains why in Revelation so many of the promises, titles and images of Old Testament Israel are applied to the churches. Jesus has made his people to be a "kingdom and priests" (1:5; 5:10), a title of Israel taken directly from the OT (Exodus 19:6) and applied to Christians. The bride of Christ, his church, is explicitly identified as the New Jerusalem (see 19:7; 21:2), and believers (including Gentile Christians) will have the name of the New Jerusalem written on them (3:12). These are but a few of the many examples of the Jew-Gentile church bearing the mantle of Israel (see for example Daniel 7:19,22 in Revelation 5:9; Isaiah 62:2 and 65:15 in Revelation 2:17 and 3:12; Isaiah 49:22-23 and 60:14 in Rev 3:9; Exodus 14 and Revelation 14:2-4).

Not only do we have these positive examples, but we also have the negative examples in which Christ has harsh words for unbelieving Jews who reject his gospel and persecute his people: "I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan" (2:9; see also 3:9).