

The 144,000
By grace through faith, am I one of their number?
(Part I)

Introduction

We saw last week how Jesus told His disciples that after His death and resurrection in Jerusalem of Judea He would go ahead of them to Galilee (“Galilee of the nations [*ethnos*]”; Mat. 26:32; 28:7, 10). It was in “Galilee of the nations” (cf. Mat. 4:12-17) where Jesus came to the disciples and first commissioned them to “Go... and make disciples of all nations [*ethnos*]” (Mat. 28:16-20). And yet at the ascension of Jesus, the disciples were back again in Jerusalem of Judea, at which time Jesus commanded them *not to leave Jerusalem*, but to wait for the promise of the Father—the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4). The reason for this is that Jesus would have us see the continuity between the Old Covenant Israel (which was centered in Jerusalem) and this New Covenant Israel whose boundaries will expand outward from Jerusalem to encompass “all the nations.” So Jesus says in verse 8 of Acts chapter one:

- Acts 1:8 — “...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and [then] in all Judea and Samaria, and [then] even to the end of the earth.”

This New Covenant Israel is the fulfillment of Old Covenant Israel, even as the New Covenant fulfills the Old. This is why it was “necessary” that the number of the apostles be brought back to twelve (Acts 1:21-26). Jesus chose twelve apostles to correspond to the number of tribes in the Old Covenant Israel. He did this so that we might see that this eschatological community that’s about to be birthed through the witness of the apostles is in fact the New Covenant Israel that had been foretold by the prophets—an Israel now without ethnic or geographical boundaries; an Israel that extends from Jerusalem even to the “end of the earth.”

It’s in this light that we understand the beautiful symbolism of the number “twelve” in Revelation. When the Apostle John describes the new creation in terms of a new Jerusalem, he tells us that the city has “twelve gates” and that written on those gates are “the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel” (Rev. 21:12). The city also has “twelve foundation stones,” and written on those foundation stones are “the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (Rev. 21:14). The wall of the city is 144 cubits (12 x 12; Rev. 21:17) and the city itself is 12,000 stadia squared (12,000 x 12,000 x 12,000; Rev. 21:16), and on either side of the river that flows through the city is the tree of life, “bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month [for twelve months all year long]; and the leaves of the tree [are] for the healing of *the nations*” (Rev. 22:2).

In Revelation chapter seven, 12,000 from “every tribe of the sons of Israel” (though not including the tribe of Dan) are sealed for a total of 144,000 (12 x 12,000; “I heard the *number*”). Now given the progress (the movement and development) of redemptive history that we’re seeing in Acts, who would we say that these 144,000 represent? Not Old Covenant Israel, but New Covenant Israel. The 144,000 from every tribe of the sons of Israel represent the complete number of all God’s elect in this eschatological New Covenant community.

In Revelation 5, John *heard* one of the elders saying to him, “Behold, the *Lion* that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome so as to open the scroll and its seven seals” (Rev. 5:5). But when John was *shown* this “Lion,” what he “*saw*” was not a Lion, but a Lamb standing, as if slain (Rev. 5:6, 9). It was this Lamb who opened the seven seals. “The promises concerning ‘the Lion of Judah’ [in Gen. 49 (vv. 8-12)] are... fulfilled through the blood of the Lamb” (Koester). So also, in Revelation chapter seven, John will *hear* an angel telling the number of those who have been sealed, “144,000... from every tribe [*ek pas phyle*] of the sons of Israel” (Rev. 7:2-8). But when John *looks*, what he *sees* is not 144,000, but “a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and [all] tribes [*ek pas... phyle*] and peoples and tongues” (Rev. 7:9). “The [Old Testament] promises concerning the [tribes of Israel] are... fulfilled through the multitudes that are redeemed by the blood of the Lamb” (Koester).

We see, then, that this is our identity. We are members of this eschatological New Covenant community as we live in the midst of this world. We are part of the 144,000 from every tribe of the sons of Israel—even of this “great multitude which no one [can] count.” This week and next week, we’re going to take a closer look at what this identity means.

Sealed

Revelation 6 concludes with the coming of the wrath of the Lamb and of Him who sits on the throne. We see the sky being split apart like a scroll and every mountain and island being moved out of their places. We see people hiding themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains and we hear them crying out with this question: “Who is able to stand?” (Rev. 6:12-17; cf. Nah. 1:6). In Revelation chapter seven, this question is answered.

- Revelation 7:1–4 (cf. Ezek. 9:1-11) — After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, so that no wind would blow on the earth or on the sea or on any tree. Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God; and he cried out with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, saying, “Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the bondslaves [*doulos*] of our God on their foreheads.” And I heard the number of those having been sealed, 144,000 sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel...

Who can stand in the day of God’s wrath? Only the 144,000 bondslaves of God who have been sealed on their foreheads from every tribe of the sons of Israel. In Revelation chapter 14, we’ll see that the 144,000 are those who have the name of the Lamb and of His Father written on their forehead. This is the seal that *we’ve* been given. It’s the sign that we belong to God as His property—as His bondslaves (*doulos*)—and that He will therefore preserve us and keep us safe through all tribulation (cf. Rev. 3:10).

It’s important to understand that in the book of Revelation there are only two groups of people. There are those who have the name of the Lamb and of His Father written on their foreheads, and there are those who have the name of the beast or the number of his name on their right hand or on their forehead (Rev. 9:4; 13:16-17; cf. 14:9-10; 20:4). In other words, there are those who belong to God and to the Lamb, and there are those who belong to the world and to

the devil. There's no category in between. There's no group of people with no name written on their foreheads. We know from the rest of the book of Revelation that there are far more than 144,000 ethnic Jews who refuse the mark of the beast (Rev. 14:9-10; 20:4). Therefore, there must be far more than just a literal 144,000 ethnic Jews who are sealed with the name of the Lamb and of His Father written on their foreheads. We see this in Revelation chapter 3, when Jesus defines for us who the "true" Jews are.

- Revelation 3:9, 12-13 — [To the church in Philadelphia:] "Behold, I am giving over those of the *synagogue of Satan*, those *who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie*. Behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and make them know that I have loved you. He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the sanctuary of My God, and he will never go out from it anymore. *And I will write on him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name*. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

According to Revelation 7, all of God's "bondslaves" are to be sealed ("Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the bondslaves of our God on their foreheads"); not one of God's bondslaves is to be left out. Therefore, it's the complete number of all God's bondslaves that's represented by this number that John heard: 144,000; 12,000 from every tribe of the sons of Israel. Notice how the book of Revelation begins:

- Revelation 1:1 (cf. 2:20) — The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His **bondslaves** the things which must soon happen...

And then notice how it ends:

- Revelation 22:6 — And he said to me, "These words are faithful and true"; and the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent His angel to show to His **bondslaves** the things which must soon take place.

Who, then, are the 144,000 bondslaves who are sealed in Revelation 7? They are all those who are true Jews, whose citizenship is in the new Jerusalem which comes down out of heaven from God. In Revelation 22, we learn that the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in this New Jerusalem, and that there "His **bondslaves** [*doulos*; cf. 1:1; 2:20; 22:6] will serve Him; and they will see His face, **and His name will be on their foreheads**" (Rev. 22:3-4).

So we come back now to our original question: Who can **stand** in the day of the wrath of **Him who sits on the throne** and of **the Lamb**? And we answer: Only the 144,000 from every tribe of the sons of Israel, a number which represents—and is fulfilled in—that "great multitude which no one [can] count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, **standing** before **the throne** and before **the Lamb**" (Rev. 7:9).

- Revelation 7:14 — "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation [the tribulation that began in the days of John's first readers; 3:10], and they washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

In Revelation chapter 7, John hears of the 144,000 on earth. He hears of them being sealed as the guarantee that they'll be preserved safely through all the trials and tribulations of this world and even through the wrath of God on the final day. Nothing can touch them. There is no one who can snatch them out of the Father's hand (Jn. 10:27-29). There is nothing that can separate them from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:37-39). And so we read in Revelation chapter 14:

- Revelation 14:1 — Then I looked, and behold, the Lamb was standing on Mount Zion, and with Him 144,000, having His name and the name of His Father written on their foreheads.

Here, John sees the Lamb standing victorious on the heavenly "Mount Zion" — the new Jerusalem as it is in heaven even now (Gal. 4:27; Heb. 12:22; 1 Pet. 2:4-6). And who does John see with the Lamb in heaven? He sees the exact number of those who were sealed on earth: 144,000. Not one of those who were sealed was lost. Every one of those who were sealed was preserved safely through the trials and tribulations of this world and even through the wrath of God on the final day to stand with the Lamb on Mount Zion and to share with the Lamb in His victory.

- Romans 8:28-30 — [Truly, then,] we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose. Because those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brothers; and those whom He predestined, He also called; and those whom He called, He also justified; and those whom He justified, He also glorified.

This vision of the 144,000 standing with the Lamb on Mount Zion is meant to encourage us and fill us with hope. We have a wonderful peace and security even in the midst of the trials and tribulations and sufferings of this world (cf. Rev. 1:9; 13:10) because the Lamb has already persevered through the ultimate sufferings and even through the wrath of God. As the Apostle Paul says, we who have "believed" have been "sealed in [Christ] with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, unto the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory" (Eph. 1:13-14; cf. 4:30; 2 Cor. 1:22).

Who are the 144,000? They are all the true bondslaves of God who have been sealed with His name and the name of the Lamb written upon their foreheads. They are all who are being kept and preserved by God until that day when they stand with the Lamb on Mount Zion. By faith, and through grace, are you one of their number?

Purchased

- Revelation 14:1-3 — Then I looked, and behold, the Lamb was standing on Mount Zion, and with Him 144,000, having His name and the name of His Father written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder, and the voice which I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps. And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the

elders. And no one could learn that song except the 144,000 *who had been purchased from the earth*.

In the book of Revelation, the phrase “those who dwell on the earth” always refers to the mass of unregenerate, wicked, rebellious, and fallen humanity (Rev. 3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 12:12; 13:8, 12, 14; 17:2, 8). So the 144,000 are those who have been purchased from out of that great mass of rebellious and fallen humanity (they’ve been “purchased from the earth”). This isn’t a special group of ethnic Jews who’ve been purchased separately from the rest of their believing Jewish and Gentile brothers and sisters. This is the complete number of those who have been purchased from the earth by the blood of the Lamb.

It’s important to see that no one but the 144,000 can learn the “new song” that’s being sung in heaven. Why is this? Because no one but the 144,000 has been purchased from the earth. In the Old Testament the “new song” is always the song of redemption, and it’s only those who have experienced redemption who are able to sing of that redemption (cf. Ps. 33:1-7; 40:1-3; 96:1-6; 98:1-3; 144:9-10; 149:1-4; Isa. 42:10-13). It’s only those who understand what it is to be redeemed who can learn that “new song” that the redeemed sing. But are there really only 144,000 ethnic Jews who’ve been purchased from the earth and who can sing the “new song” of redemption? We remember an earlier scene from Revelation chapter 5.

- Revelation 5:8-9 — The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb... And **they sang a new song, saying**, “Worthy are You to take the scroll and to open its seals, because You were slain and **purchased** for God with Your blood people **from every tribe and tongue and people and nation**.”

Once again, we see that the 144,000 from every tribe of the sons of Israel is a number that represents—and is fulfilled in—that “great multitude which no one [can] count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev. 7:9). The 144,000 from every tribe of the (twelve) sons of Israel represents—and is fulfilled in—that eschatological New Covenant community that’s built upon the foundation of the twelve apostles.

Conclusion

By faith and through grace, then, are you one of this number? Have you been sealed so as to be preserved safely through all trials and tribulations, and so as to stand even in the day of God’s wrath? As a true bondservant of God, do you have the name of the Lamb and the name of His Father written on your forehead? As one who has been purchased from the earth by the blood of the Lamb, do you love to sing that “new song” that only the redeemed can sing? Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have been “*purchased* with a price,” even “with the precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ,” let us “glorify God in [our] body” (1 Cor. 6:19-20 & 1 Pet. 1:18-19; cf. 7:23). In this way, we will assure our hearts before God even in whatever our heart condemns us (1 Jn. 3:18-20), and rejoice to know that by grace alone, through faith alone, we have been included in the number of the 144,000 who stand with the Lamb on Mount Zion.