

“Who are the 144,000?”

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- . Biblical text at the end of sermon.
- . Previous sermons in this series available on the website
- . See: www.jewsforjesus.org.au/sermons.html
- .

Introduction

Jews are just like everyone else, only more so. That’s how the saying goes. And we live in such a frame of mind that this is a regular quip and motto. In today’s story, though, the opposite is true. Jews are like everyone else in the picture of heaven, and specifically mentioned, but less so. What do I mean? I mean that there are only 140,000 Jews but millions of others, non-Jews in the glimpse of heaven John gives us. So we take a limited number and compare it to the unlimited, uncountable gazillions of the later view.

How shall we read this? As a dismissal? As a mention of us for the sake of diminution? Or shall we see it as a special notice amidst the uncountable throngs? I prefer the latter, of course, as I’m Jewish, but is that what is in view....really?

Honestly I can say, ‘yes.’ By special mention, in fact, by special definition and clear highlighting, It’s not a single glance; it’s 5 verses of honourable mention. It’s like God is saying something in his acceptance speech of sorts. And he is bragging about whom he wants to include and there are twelve thousand of various friends and neighbours.

Being special doesn’t make you better than anyone else. This is a lesson we’ve tried to make very clear here at Beth Messiah. Being a covenant people is significant and right and glorious. But we as Jews are no better than Gentiles any more than men are better than women or cricket is better than bowls. Each is good in its own way. And listen, I’m not even mentioning 20/20 cricket...give me time.

God has a plan for Jews and that is something that is not limited to Older Testament times with David the King or Solomon the Wise. It’s still in effect some 3,000 years later with us in Australia and in Israel and in England and wherever Jewish people live.

And this plan includes the Lamb who was slain. Jewish people today still have to deal with Y’shua. Gentiles today have to deal with Y’shua. And we have to do it today, not then. Then will be too late.

Have you heard some Jewish people say something like this? You believe Jesus is the Messiah. I believe in the coming of Messiah. When he comes, if it’s Jesus, then I’ll believe like you. It really doesn’t matter. Have you heard that argument?

Listen to what CS Lewis had to say on that one.

“When the author walks onto the stage, the play is over. God is going to invade, all right; but what is the good of saying you are on His side then, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something else comes crashing in? This time it will be God without disguise; something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side. That will not be the time for choosing; It will be the time when we discover which side we really have chosen, whether we realized it before or not. Now, today, this moment, is our chance to choose the right side.”

Let’s look at our chapter today, Revelation seven, and see some features of the eternal interlude, a glimpse of heaven and specifically ask, ‘Who are the 144,000?’

Four Angels (.1-.3)

Remember, last week we compared the seven seals to Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture. And John got through six of the seals. Now he interrupts himself with what might be called "Interlude" in music. No mention is made of horses or horsemen or judgments. The chapter begins with a view of four angels. And these angels are stationed at strategic locations on the earth's surface. Their purpose is to prevent winds from blowing on the sealed, that is, on the chosen people of God, who worship the Almighty and are the objects of God's abiding grace.

Also we have said that 'four', that is the number four, is a biblical number of universality. In the same way there are four winds, and we even have the Monday night ABC show "Four Corners," here in verse one, we understand the picture is one of the whole earth at once.

Have you heard people in the news the last three weeks saying things like, "The greatest thing about the tsunami situation, is the unification of the earth. We are all one in this thing. We are a brotherhood of humanity and when one suffers, we all suffer." Such banter makes good fills on telethons like we saw last Saturday night. It also does remind us of our civic responsibility and the plight of the world's poor. That's all good.

And we will see John's use of the number 'four' again and again. Here the universal is clearly in view, with the four corners, the four angels and the four winds. It's like he is saying, 'the whole earth is pictured at once.' We would use a photo of a globe and be done with it, but he has rhetoric to use and no PowerPoint photos.

Sealing on the forehead (.4)

Jewish people and marks on the body are inconsistent. One because Leviticus says something against tattooing and another because in the last century, Adolph Hitler put many marks on our bodies that we didn't request. So Jewish tattoos don't make sense. Here, though it seems that God is saying Jews need to get marks of some kind and that they should be on our foreheads! That's not private, is it?

So the universal picture John is painting now zooms into the Jewish world. And the first group he shows us is the 12,000 from each of the selected 12 tribes, before he widens the angle of his camera to show us even more people. This is good cinematography.

And it's a repeat of another biblical episode from the prophet Ezekiel (chapter 9). Specifically listen to this verse, "And the LORD said to him, "Go through the midst of the city, even through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations which are being committed in its midst." The ones who received this mark are the faithful ones who deplored the idolatry of the faithless Israelites around them. They were sealed from trouble which would surely come.

Let's talk about the seal itself on the forehead. Jewish men of late wear tefillin each morning (except Shabbat). This leather strap has meaning reflected in Deuteronomy chapter six. There we are instructed to mark God's words on our forehead. It is a reminder of what happened (as is often the case) in the Exodus from Egypt. (Ex.13.9, Deut. 6.8) Although the forehead is hard and thickheadedness might be in view, God wants his word to penetrate us. He wants to invade our cranium and our heart. So the instruction about forehead carries with it the instruction of humility and receiving of God's words to us. The most famous forehead in the Bible is that of...do you know? Goliath. He had a thick skull, but David used it as target practice and as such freed the Jews from Philistine tyranny.

Here in Revelation, the sealed have the mark of God on their foreheads.

Who are the 144,000? (.4-.8)

Now we get to the big question of the day. Who are the 144,000? Is this a literal number. Of course not. There have been tens of thousands of Jewish believers in Jesus who are new to Messiah since 1987, from 1967 to now, perhaps 200,000 Jews have

found Y'shua as Lord. In the first century when John was writing estimates have Jewish believing population well over 300,000. So who are the elect of the elect, these special super-honourable mention?

The Jehovah's Witnesses claim the 144,000 are their own, and of their own, only the top number getters. It's a contest after all. The elite get in; the others are outsiders. JW's have heaps more than that who are members. Others have used the 144,000 as elite membership and thus a secret society within their group.

Each group, even the Essenes of the Qumran scrolls, claimed to be the elite of the elite. They would have used the term "true Israel" to describe themselves, even as Sydney Anglicans do at times.

What a shame and a misread of this apocalyptic book. 12 is the number of completion. Evidence? 12 months making one year, 12 crops of fruit, 12 thousand stadia in the holy city, even the wall is 144 (12x12) cubits high. Twelve tribes of complete Israel, with no one left out, and 12 Apostles to cover the entire world. John is using 12 x 12 to indicate no one is being left out. All the Israel that is being saved is saved. No Jewish person who names Y'shua will be cast away. How comforting is this in a time of persecution! How awesome is our God to seal us with his tefillin and to name us from eternity to eternity.

1,000 is a generally recognized 'large number' indicating again that the 12 x 12 x 1,000 is a large gathering. It's hardly intended for precision but for fullness of fullness. It's the complete large number of Jews who have been sealed. Not as Jews only but as followers of the Lamb who opens the seals. These are none other than Jewish believers in Jesus.

The Great Multitude (.9)

And in stark contrast are the next group listed, the "great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues"

Did you count the number of groups listed? Nation, tribes, peoples, tongues. Four. Right again. Even as we saw in chapter five, this is the universal Church, the people of God who name the name of Y'shua as Lord and Saviour.

The 144,000 complete number of Jewish believers (remember in the 19th century, over 200,000 Jews came to Christ in Europe alone!) meets the rest of the church in a glorious throng and praise service. You think the world came together for tsunami relief? Wait till you see the church come together for the praise of the Lamb! Shouting with a loud voice, bowing, white robes, adoration, celebrations. This is better than WaveAid, this is Awake and Praise for he gave us His Aid!

Lamb as Shepherd (.17)

The oddest phrase in our chapter today is not the 144,000, but the teaching about the Lamb himself. He was introduced in earlier chapters, and therefore we know the Lamb is Y'shua, Jesus. He died and paid our penalty for our sins. We opposed God and yet God in his mercy and love sent his son to die for us and to redeem us to himself.

Now lambs have characteristics that are fairly well known. They are fairly dumb. They are in need of guidance due to their capacity to get lost. And lambs might die before they become adults without someone looking after them like a loving shepherd.

So it's a bit surprising to read in verse 17 that the 'lamb will be their shepherd.' How can a lamb be a shepherd? Either you lead or are led, either you are the functionary of the function-receiver. But in God's economy the surprises never end.

The surprise in God is that the Lamb who saves us is the Shepherd who guides us. By his death he forgives our sins; by his life, he leads us as his sheep to good pasture. Takes one to know one, they would say.

And here we have gazillions of myriads of believers who are all able to count on the One who died for us, who gives us white robes and who spreads his sukkah of protection over us. He gives us food and drink a plenty, and comfort in all our losses. What a mighty God we have and serve, amen?

Summary

So: What should you learn/hear today as a result of reading this text? Or what lessons do we learn from today's teaching?

- 1) Be blessed by reading this book regularly
- 2) Being sealed doesn't mean living problem-free, but it does mean living eternally
- 3) Worship is the chief activity of the people of God
- 4) There awaits a problem-free, no tears life in the future
- 5) God's love is not limited to a specific group; it's universal
- 6) God will tend to us as a shepherd, guiding us each step

Invitation

We want to give a choice to you. Maybe you have been an opponent of the Messiah. Maybe you have worshipped wrong. Maybe you have rejected what God said, but today you want to turn and agree with God about Y'shua. If you would like to be delivered from your sin by the blood of Y'shua, then pray this prayer and receive His love and grace. Father, forgive me in the name of Y'shua for all my sins. He was the Saviour and the fulfilment of all prophecies about Messiah. He is the one and the only one who can save me from my selfishness, from my sin. I acknowledge Y'shua as that one who wants to free me, and who alone can free me. I repent of my sin and accept Y'shua as my deliverer. By faith I am now born again by the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you prayed that prayer, please talk to me after the service is over, [\[or email me if you are reading this online\]](#) so we can talk about growing in this knowledge and this relationship with God.

Actual text

Rev. 7.1 ¶ 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 should blow on the earth or on the sea or on any tree.

Rev. 7.2 And 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,

Rev. 7.3 saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads."

Rev. 7.4 And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel:

Rev. 7.5 from the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand, from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand,

Rev. 7.6 from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand, from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand, from the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand,

Rev. 7.7 from the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand, from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand, from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand,

Rev. 7.8 from the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand, from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand, from the tribe of Benjamin, twelve thousand were sealed.

Rev. 7.9 ¶ After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands;

Rev. 7.10 ¶ and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”

Rev. 7.11 And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures; and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,

Rev. 7.12 ¶ saying, “Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen.”

Rev. 7.13 And one of the elders answered, saying to me, “These who are clothed in the white robes, who are they, and from where have they come?”

Rev. 7.14 And I said to him, “My lord, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

Rev. 7.15 “For this reason, they are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne shall spread His tabernacle over them.

Rev. 7.16 “They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; neither shall the sun beat down on them, nor any heat;

Rev. 7.17 for the Lamb in the centre of the throne shall be their shepherd, and shall guide them to springs of the water of life; and God shall wipe every tear from their eyes.”

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