

THE BOOK OF THE REVELATION

REVELATION 7 — WHO ARE THE 144,000?

Setting the Scene

Chapter 6 ended with a question: “The great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?” (6:17). We might expect John immediately to show us the seventh seal. Instead, everything stops.

It is an interlude. If Chapter 6 was like the 1812 Overture, with the first six seals building toward a crescendo, Chapter 7 interrupts the music before the final movement. Four angels stand at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds. Nothing moves until God's servants are sealed. Once again John uses the number four to give us a universal picture: four corners, four winds, four angels. The whole earth is in view. Nothing is left out.

Then suddenly the camera zooms in. John hears the number of those who are sealed: 144,000 from the tribes of Israel. Jewish people receive five verses of special mention before John's vision widens again and he sees something he cannot number—a vast multitude “from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues” (7:9).

So who are the 144,000? Are they an elite group? Is the number literal? Why are the tribes listed in such an unusual way? And what is the relationship between these Jewish people and the uncountable multitude that immediately follows?

Those questions matter, but we should not allow them to obscure why John gives us this chapter. He is writing to believers who know persecution and who have just heard the martyrs cry, “How long?” Chapter 7 is not primarily an exercise in census taking. It is a strong word of assurance.

God knows His people. He seals them. He will not lose them.

Lesson Summary

Before the seventh seal is opened, John sees four angels restraining the winds of judgment while another angel commands that God's servants be sealed on their foreheads. John hears their number: 144,000, drawn from the tribes of Israel.

The list is unmistakably Jewish, but it is also unusual. Dan is absent. Ephraim is not named, although Joseph is. Levi, normally excluded from lists concerned with Israel's territorial inheritance, is included. That should caution us against treating John's list as though he

were providing a census register. The numbers themselves point toward completeness: twelve tribes, twelve thousand from each, twelve multiplied by twelve and then by a thousand. The emphasis is not on an exclusive spiritual club but on the fullness of the Jewish people whom God knows as His own.

Being specially mentioned does not mean being better than everyone else. God's covenant purposes for Israel matter, and they have not disappeared. But Jewish people still come to God through the Lamb who was slain. Being Jewish does not remove the need for Yeshua any more than being Gentile does.

Then John looks, and the scene expands dramatically. Before him is “a great multitude which no one could count,” drawn from every nation, tribe, people and tongue. Again we encounter a fourfold description, and again the universal is in view. The Jewish people have not disappeared into the nations, nor are the nations excluded from Israel's God. Both stand within the great purposes of the Lamb.

And what are they doing? They are worshiping.

That takes us back to one of the great themes of Revelation. John is comforting suffering believers, but he is also continually drawing them into worship. The multitude cries out that salvation belongs to God and to the Lamb, and heaven answers with blessing, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honor, power and might.

Then comes one of the most surprising pictures in the chapter. The Lamb becomes the Shepherd. He guides His people to springs of the water of life, and God wipes every tear from their eyes.

That is John's answer to Chapter 6. Who is able to stand? The people whom God knows, seals, saves and shepherds.

The Big Idea

God knows His people and will not lose them. Being sealed does not mean living problem-free, but it does mean that suffering will not have the final word. The Lamb who saves us is also the Shepherd who will lead us home.

Opening Prayer

Father, thank You that You know those who belong to You. When we are frightened by what happens around us, remind us that we are not forgotten. Help us to understand Your continuing purposes for Israel and Your great love for people from every nation, tribe, people and tongue. Teach us to worship with that great multitude and to trust Yeshua, the Lamb who was slain and the Shepherd who leads us. And when we weep, remind us that the day is coming when You will wipe every tear from our eyes. May it be soon. Amen.

Commentary

An Interlude Before the Seventh Seal

Revelation 6 has taken us through six seals. We are ready for number seven, but John makes us wait. This is not an accidental interruption. The pause allows him to answer the question with which Chapter 6 ended: “Who is able to stand?”

John sees four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds so that no wind will blow on the earth, sea or trees (7:1). We have noticed John's use of the number four. The four living creatures surrounded the throne. Four horsemen rode out when the first four seals were opened. Now there are four angels, four corners and four winds.

John did not have a globe sitting in the middle of his vision. He uses the language available to him to portray the whole created world. North, south, east and west—the universal is in view. But before anything further happens, another angel rises from the east, “having the seal of the living God” (7:2). He commands the four angels not to harm the earth, sea or trees “until we have sealed the bondservants of our God on their foreheads” (7:3).

Judgment waits while God marks His people.

That does not mean they will escape every difficulty. Chapter 7 itself will make that impossible to believe. These people come through tribulation and difficulties. They know hunger, thirst, exposure and tears. The seal does not promise the absence of suffering. It declares ownership.

They belong to God.

Sealed on Their Foreheads

The location of the seal is striking. God's servants are marked on their foreheads. For Jewish readers, that immediately brings several passages of the Tanakh to mind. In Ezekiel 9, Jerusalem is about to come under judgment, but before that judgment begins, God commands that a mark be placed on the foreheads of those who grieve over the abominations being committed in the city (Ezekiel 9:4). The mark identifies those who belong to God before judgment falls. John repeatedly expects us to recognize the Tanakh, and Ezekiel seems especially close to what John sees here.

There is also a very Jewish association with the forehead. In the Shema, Israel is commanded to bind God's words “as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead” (Deuteronomy 6:8). Jewish men have taken that command quite literally in the wearing of tefillin. God's words are placed inside small boxes and are then bound to the arm and placed at the forehead using leather straps. They identify a person as belonging to the covenant and living under the Word of God. So, when Revelation speaks of God's servants being sealed on their foreheads, I don't think we should immediately imagine a tattoo or some mysterious end-times technology. The Tanakh has already supplied John's vocabulary. The mark says that these people belong to God.

And it is deliberately visible. This is not a secret discipleship. God knows whose are His, and His people bear His name. That will become increasingly important as Revelation develops, because another mark will eventually appear. Revelation will contrast those who bear the mark of the beast with those who bear the name of God (13:16; 14:1). The fundamental question is not whether human beings will be marked, but whose mark they bear and where their allegiance lies.

Who Are the 144,000?

Then John hears the number: “one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel” (7:4). Notice first that John says Israel. I don’t want to hurry past that. Throughout Christian history there has often been a tendency to make Israel disappear whenever Israel becomes inconvenient to someone’s theological system. John doesn’t do that. Jewish people receive five verses of specific and honorable mention.

Paul said of the Jewish people they are “Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Messiah according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.” (Romans 9:4-5)

But special mention is not superiority. Being God’s covenant people is significant. It is right and glorious, but Jewish people are not therefore better than Gentiles any more than men are better than women. God’s purposes for Israel continue, but those purposes center on the Lamb. Jewish people need Yeshua. Gentiles need Yeshua. All of us meet God through the One who was slain and now stands.

So is 144,000 a literal headcount? I don’t think so. Revelation has already taught us to pay attention to numbers symbolically. Twelve repeatedly signifies completeness connected with God’s people: twelve tribes of Israel, twelve apostles, and later twelve gates and twelve foundations in the New Jerusalem. The city itself will measure twelve thousand stadia, and its wall will measure 144 cubits (21:12–17). Here we have twelve times twelve, multiplied by a thousand.

A thousand regularly functions in biblical speech as an enormous or complete quantity rather than requiring mathematical precision. God owns “the cattle on a thousand hills” (Psalm 50:10). I don’t think the cattle on hill number 1,001 therefore belong to somebody else. John is piling completeness upon completeness. The 144,000 are not an elite spiritual club competing for a limited number of available seats. The number assures persecuted Jewish believers that God will not misplace one of His own. All the Israel God intends to save will be saved. That is comfort, not arithmetic.

I cannot emphasize this enough. When troubles come into a person’s life, and we look around or look up or look outward, we don’t have to worry; God is on the throne. The full number of Jewish people who embrace Yeshua as Messiah and Lord will make it into His presence. Assurance leads to comfort, to be sure.

An Unusual List of Tribes

The tribal list itself should make us cautious about forcing literal precision onto the number. Judah appears first rather than Reuben, even though Reuben was Jacob's firstborn. Dan is absent. Ephraim is not named, although Joseph is. Manasseh appears separately. And Levi is included even though Levi normally received no territorial inheritance when the land was divided. This is not one of the standard tribal lists of the Tanakh.

In fact, there isn't simply one standard list. The tribal names vary depending on the purpose of the passage. Sometimes Levi is included; sometimes he isn't. Sometimes Joseph appears; elsewhere his sons Ephraim and Manasseh take his place. Revelation gives us yet another arrangement. That should tell us something before we start trying to identify precisely 12,000 modern descendants from each tribe.

This chapter isn't asking us to reconstruct lost genealogical records. Those would be impossible as tribal identities have dissipated with 2000 years of spread, intermarriage, and without the tribal reconfiguration which would have taken place in the Years of Jubilee. John is assuring God's people that God knows what we do not know. I do not know my tribe, nevertheless God knows His people.

Two things pop up for me related to tribes. First, for most Jewish people today, tribal identification simply isn't available. Kohanim (priests) and Levites have preserved particular family traditions, sometimes reflected in names such as Cohen or Levi, identifying them with the tribe of Levi. None of the rest of us could produce a genealogy proving whether we descend from Judah, Benjamin, Issachar or Naphtali.

Second, combine that lack of reliable information with the prediction about Messiah. Messiah had to come from the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:10), and the New Testament identifies Yeshua's Davidic and Judahite lineage while such genealogical claims could still be made (Matthew 1:1–16; Luke 3:23–38; Hebrews 7:14). No one today can honestly claim and have genealogical proof of his yichus, that is, his full history from his ancestry back to the time those records were destroyed.

As a result of these two pop ups, no one should take this section literally. It either must be representative or somewhat symbolic. And secondly, Messiah had to come before 70 CE when those genealogical records were destroyed.

Then John Looks

Something fascinating happens in verse 9. John first hears the number of those sealed: 144,000. Then he looks and sees “a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues” (7:9). We have seen John do something similar before. In Chapter 5 he heard about “the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah” (5:5), but when he looked, he saw a Lamb standing as though slain (5:6). What John hears and what John sees can give us different perspectives within the same vision.

Here the contrast is deliberate. One group is numbered; the next cannot be numbered. One is described through the tribes of Israel; the next comes from every nation. And notice again the fourfold language: nation, tribes, peoples and tongues. We saw this in Chapter 5, and John will use it again. Four points us outward. The whole world is in view.

The Jewish people have been specially named, but God's saving purposes do not stop with us. The camera widens until John sees an innumerable company drawn from the nations of the earth. Jewish particularity has not been erased, and the nations have not been excluded. Together this enormous scene demonstrates the reach of God's salvation through the Lamb. And now this vast multitude is standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands.

That takes us naturally into what they are doing there: worship.

The Great Multitude Worships

John sees the great multitude “standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands” (7:9). Their response is not to discuss how they arrived there or to compare their experiences. They worship. They cry out with a loud voice, “Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb” (7:10). Then the angels, elders and four living creatures join them, falling on their faces before the throne.

The palm branches are worth noticing. For Jewish readers, palms could carry associations of celebration and victory, and especially of Sukkot, the Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:33-43). John will soon tell us that God spreads His shelter over these people. The language of dwelling, shelter and God's presence fits beautifully with the imagery of Sukkot. Whatever else John intends by the palms, this is certainly a celebration. These are not defeated people dragging themselves into heaven. They are standing before God and rejoicing in His salvation.

Their worship expands into seven expressions of praise: “Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might” belong to God forever (7:12). Seven again suggests fullness. Everything they have to offer is offered to God. This is comprehensive worship in response to comprehensive salvation. Revelation continues to do what we have seen from the beginning: it offers comfort to the people of God and turns their eyes toward worship. Those two purposes belong together. When we remember who God is and what the Lamb has done, worship becomes one of the ways frightened people recover their confidence.

Out of the Great Tribulation

One of the elders then asks John, “These who are clothed in the white robes, who are they, and where have they come from?” (7:13). John wisely answers, “My lord, you know.” The elder explains that these are the ones “who come out of the great tribulation,” and that “they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14).

We can spend so much time arguing about when “the Great Tribulation” occurs that we miss what John is showing persecuted believers. These people have already suffered. They have come through trouble, not around it. John's original readers did not need a chart explaining that suffering might occur in some distant generation. They already knew what it meant to follow Yeshua in a hostile world. Chapter 7 is assuring them that tribulation does not mean abandonment by God.

Imagining that there will be a more powerful or dramatic tribulation that will cause many to suffer would be a hard sell to the Christians in those days or in the war zones in my world today. Christians are often easy targets of autocrats who want to impose their rules, their harsh behavior, even their religious systems on believers. People across my world regularly die because they are perceived as political opposition, whether they intended to be political or not.

I mentioned earlier in the Introduction to this series something my pastor Ernie Gruen told me. This was back near the beginning of my walk with the Lord, when I had a predilection for and fascination with the Last Days. Brother Ernie said, “Jesus didn’t say, ‘Occupy about when I’m coming,’ but rather, ‘Occupy until I come.’”

Then John gives us another of Revelation's wonderful contradictions. They wash their robes in blood, and the robes come out white. Try doing that in an ordinary laundry. Blood stains clothing; it doesn't whiten it. But this is the blood of the Lamb. The very thing that appears to signify death becomes the means of cleansing and life. We saw the same reversal in Chapter 5: slain beings don't stand, yet the slain Lamb stands. Revelation keeps overturning ordinary human expectations.

The image also challenges our instinct to establish our own righteousness. Human religion is very good at producing visible evidence of our goodness: religious duties performed, prayers prayed in front of others, money given, customs observed and good deeds accumulated. Those things may have value, but none of them can make us right with God. These people stand before the throne not because they managed to clean their own robes, but because their robes have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. Their righteousness comes from what He has done.

He Will Spread His Sukkah Over Them

“For this reason,” John says, “they are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple” (7:15). Their access to God flows from the cleansing they have received. They are not standing at a distance. They are in His presence, serving Him continually.

Then comes a phrase that is easy to miss: “He who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them” (7:15). The verb carries the idea of dwelling or pitching a tent. For Jewish ears, this is the language of the Mishkan and of Sukkot. God spreads His sukkah over His people. The God who said that He wanted to dwell among Israel (Exodus 25:8) now shelters this vast multitude with His own presence.

I don't think John is trying here to give us architectural plans for a future temple. Revelation itself will later tell us that in the New Jerusalem John sees no temple building, “for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple” (21:22). The point here is presence. God Himself becomes the shelter of His people. They live under His covering. Like a frightened toddler who hides behind the legs of her parent in a shopping center, we find comfort in the confidence we have in Him.

That promise would have sounded very different to people whose earthly security could be taken from them. Some had lost property. John certainly knew of physical and locational loss. Some faced exclusion and persecution. Others would lose their lives. John tells them that the Almighty Himself will spread His shelter over them. Their present circumstances do not define their final home.

The Lamb Becomes the Shepherd

Then we come to one of the strangest and most beautiful sentences in the chapter: “The Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd” (7:17).

Lambs normally need shepherds. They don't become shepherds. Sheep wander, need guidance and depend upon someone else to lead them to pasture and water. Yet in God's economy the Lamb becomes the Shepherd. The One who was slain for us is also the One who leads us.

We have encountered something similar in John's Gospel. Yeshua says, “I am the door of the sheep” (John 10:7), and then says, “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11). How can He be both the door and the Shepherd? The pictures are not competing descriptions but different ways of showing us what He does. Yeshua gives us access to life, and Yeshua leads us in that life. Revelation does the same thing. The Lamb who gave His life becomes the Shepherd who guides His people “to springs of the water of life” (7:17).

This is where the comfort of Revelation 7 reaches its deepest point. The people John is addressing have experienced all these things: hunger, thirst, extreme heat, hostility and tears. So he tells them that a day is coming when “they will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat” (7:16). These are not abstract theological promises for people with comfortable lives. They are words for people who need shelter, food, water and hope. Being sealed does not mean that they never suffer. It means that their suffering is not their destination.

And then John says, “God will wipe every tear from their eyes” (7:17). The picture is wonderfully personal and echoes Isaiah's promise that God “will wipe tears away from all faces” (Isaiah 25:8). God does not merely announce from a distance that crying has been abolished. He comes close enough to wipe the tears away. The Almighty who sits upon the throne is also the God who attends to the sorrow of His people. Revelation will return to this promise near the end of the book (21:4), but John wants suffering believers to hear it now.

The chapter began with angels holding back the winds while God marked His people. It ends with God sheltering them and the Lamb shepherding them. That is the answer to the frightening question at the end of Chapter 6. Who is able to stand? Those whose confidence is not in their own strength, but in the God who knows them, seals them and brings them home.

Takeaways

1. Being sealed doesn't mean living problem-free, but it does mean that suffering will not have the final word.
2. God's salvation has reached Israel and fills John's vision with people from every nation, tribe, people and tongue.
3. Revelation was written to comfort suffering believers, but that comfort continually leads them back to worship.
4. Our cleansing and right standing before God come through the Lamb who was slain, not through our religious performance.
5. The One who died for us is the One who continues to lead us to the water of life.
6. Our tears matter to God. Troubles are real, but temporary. His presence is eternal.

*Memory Verse * Revelation 7:17

“For the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.”

What's Next?

The seventh seal has been waiting. Chapter 6 took us through the first six, and Chapter 7 interrupted the action to answer the question, “Who is able to stand?” We have seen God's people sealed, an innumerable multitude worshiping before the throne, and the Lamb becoming their Shepherd.

Now, at last, the Lamb opens the seventh seal. And what happens? Nothing. At least, not at first.

After all the noise of the horsemen, the cries of the martyrs and the thunderous worship around the throne, there is silence in heaven for about half an hour. Then the prayers of God's people rise before Him like incense, fire comes from the altar, and seven angels prepare to sound seven trumpets.

The judgments that follow are terrible, but something we have already learned will remain true: they are limited. Again and again Chapter 8 speaks of a third of the earth, a third of the trees, a third of the sea and a third of its creatures. Judgment is real, but God has not surrendered control.

Chapter 8 will therefore bring us back to the questions Revelation keeps asking us: What is God doing? What is He not doing? And how should His people live while the world around them is shaking?

Listen to the Teaching

This chapter draws particularly from my 2015 teaching on Revelation 7.

Listen to Revelation 7 — Who Are the 144,000?

144,000?](https://youtu.be/pXgYIK_A4ZM?si=ZE5UdkqCFDdzz8-m&t=26&utm_source=chatgpt.com)

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VERSE BY VERSE COMMENTARY

THE REVELATION OF
YESHUA
HA
MASHIACH

THE WORTHY LAMB. THE FAITHFUL KING.
HOPE FOR GOD'S PEOPLE. LIGHT FOR THE NATIONS.

*"Blessed is the one who reads aloud
the words of this prophecy, and blessed
are those who hear, and who keep what
is written in it; for the time is near."* — REV. 1:3



**CONFIDENCE
IN HIM**

He is worthy.
We are secure.



**COMFORT
FROM HIM**

He is with us.
We will endure.



**WORSHIP
TO HIM**

He is exalted.
We give Him glory.



ROOTED IN THE
HEBREW SCRIPTURES



GOD'S PEOPLE.
GOD'S PROMISES.



FOR EVERY TRIBE, TONGUE,
PEOPLE AND NATION

BOB MENDELSON

MESSIANIC JEWISH BIBLE TEACHER