

THE GREAT MULTITUDE

Revelation 7, 14, and 19

We are going to look this morning at the heavenly worship of God in Revelation 7, 14, and 19.

We begin with chapter 7: *After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree.*

In chapter four we see that the four directions—north, south, east, and west- and their angels represent creation. The “holding back” shows how God is holding up His final judgment until the end. If not for that, we would all be destroyed in an instant.

Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: “Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.”

The seal represents how God protects us from the final destruction.

Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel. From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben 12,000, from the tribe of Gad 12,000, from the tribe of Asher 12,000, from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000, from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000, from the tribe of Simeon 12,000, from the tribe of Levi 12,000, from the tribe of Issachar 12,000, from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000, from the tribe of Joseph 12,000, from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000.

The number 144,000 is 12 times 12 times 1,000. Twelve is the number of the Church. It is the number of the tribes of Israel (Old testament Church) and the 12 disciples (New Testament Church). If you square 12, you get 144. Squaring the number makes it more complete, more perfect. Multiplying by 1,000 makes it large.

The tribes of Israel mentioned in the Old Testament include Dan, who is not mentioned here, but not Manasseh, who is here. In the book of Numbers, the Promised Land was to be divided among these tribes, except Levi, whose people were to be the priests and to be in each tribal land. The descendants of Joseph received two sections of land for each of his sons—Ephraim and Manasseh. Ephraim is not mentioned here; instead it says, “Joseph.” Dan is not listed because in the Old Testament, Dan became a site of pagan worship. Near the city of Dan is the so-called “Gates of Hell” where the worship of the god Baal took place. So the exclusion of Dan shows that those in pagan worship are not part of the promise.

The number 144,000 causes a lot of confusion. The Jehovah Witnesses, among other groups, believe that 144,000 is the number of those who will receive special blessing in heaven. If God is supposed to be so great in His love, how can 144,000 show that? The world has around 7.9 billion people. That means that only .00018% of the people today would be saved. That doesn't include anyone not still alive from before or those who haven't yet been conceived.

Large numbers are much more concrete to us today because we work with them. To be called a "millionaire" used to be a lot more amazing than it is now. If you begin your years of work now, there is a good chance you will make over a million. Our computers work easily with large numbers. Our odometers can easily show over 144,000 miles.

But in Biblical times those numbers were far more symbolic. The ancient historians tell us that when the Persian emperor Xerxes sent his troops from Turkey into Greece, they crossed over a pontoon bridge. They say it took several days for the army to cross because the force was 1.7 million strong. Our modern research shows that the number was probably between 70,000-300,000, quite a bit, but not like they said.

We know from modern warfare the impossibility of them supplying 1.7 million soldiers. Real army experts talk about logistics, not tactics. Keeping the soldiers supplied is more important than how you direct them to fight. Napoleon said, "An army runs on its stomach." One reason why Russia has done so poorly against Ukraine is their supply problems. In World War II, the Soviet Union defeated Nazi Germany because in addition to their weapons and motivation troops, they had US trucks, rail stock, and supplies like SPAM to keep them supplied.

Why the discrepancy? Why the inflation of numbers in ancient accounts? If you sit down and start to count from one to 1,000, how long will it take? Try doing that with 10,000 much less 100,000. Also try keeping records of those high numbers if you don't have zero, which wasn't developed until the middle ages by the Arabs. The Greek word for 10,000 is "myriad." It is a word that doesn't so much mean that exact number, but a number that cannot be counted.

The 144,000 is not talking about an exact mathematical amount. It symbolizes a complete number. It is showing that no one is missing who is a part of it.

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

We now have a description of a great crowd that cannot be numbered. How does this compare to the 144,000? Is this the rest who are not as good as the 144,000? It certainly could be confusing if we read it as modern people have done for the last 500 years thinking in logical

sequence: “The 144,000, then the great multitude. But in the language of John, who was a Jew, not a Greek, who based things on the Old Testament, who was from an Eastern culture the 144,000 and the “great multitude” are the same—two ways of talking about those who have faith in Christ Jesus, who are wearing white robes. Jesus tells us in Matthew about the guests invited to a wedding. They each were given a white robe to wear, but one man was found to not have one on. He is thrown out. The white robe symbolizes the righteousness of Jesus which covers us. Though we are still sinful, the sin is covered by Jesus. We are forgiven. We are the Church. The 144,000 shows the Church’s completeness—no one is missing. The great multitude shows the Church’s vastness, that God calls people from all over the world through all ages to Him in Jesus.

So why would people limit God’s grace to 144,000? Then they can imagine all kinds of ways about how that is limited, ways to control who is and who is not a part of it. Or they say that the 144,000 shows those saved by faith in Jesus, but there are other ways, represented by the great multitude for God to save people. Either way they take away from both the completeness and the vastness of God’s salvation in Jesus. He is the Way—He is what God offers us. Don’t look elsewhere!

The angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying:

This already happened in chapter 4. It is beautifully depicted in the hymn “Crown Him with Many Crowns.”

“Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!” Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?” I answered, “Sir, you know.” And he said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

How do you make something white with blood? Blood is a tough stain to get out (just ask Lady Macbeth). His refers to the Old Testament Day of Atonement, which literally means, “Day of Atonement.” Once a year the high priest was to take a lamb of a slaughtered lamb and pour it over the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark contained the Ten Commandments. God could look down and see the people’s sins, them breaking the commandments. But the blood “covered” the Ark. God could not see the sins. This was all symbolic of what really happened when Jesus shed His blood on the cross to cover our sins, to make us “white in His blood.” This makes certain that the crowd in heaven is the Church, the body of Christ, those like us who have faith in Jesus.

Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; He will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

The idea of serving all day and night in the clouds might sound kind of boring to us. But this is told in the context of “never hungering,” “never thirsting,” “never scorch by heat.” We may experience those things, but not like the people John wrote to. These were people who experience going to bed at night without a meal, dying of thirst, having no such thing as an electric fan much less air conditioning to cool them. For them just knowing that everyday would not be filled with extreme suffering was a great blessing. Instead of thinking of how bored we would be just strumming on our harps in heaven, think of what it will mean to be led by our shepherd Jesus and to have God wipe away all our tears. It is better than we can ever imagine!

We go on into Revelation 14 and see the 144,000 again:

Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with Him 144,000 who had His name and His Father’s name written on their foreheads. And I heard a sound from heaven like the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder.

The roar of rushing waters and the peal of thunder tell us this is a big noise; it gets noticed! We also hear of the sound, “The sound I heard was like that of harpists playing their harps.” This reflects on the music at the temple. It was a symbol of the heavenly worship of God. Again this is not emphasizing that all we will do in heaven is play on our harps, but that we will be close to God as the temple was seen in the Old Testament as the closest place on earth to God.

And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders.

Psalm 90 urges us: “Sing to the LORD a new song, for He has done marvelous things.” The idea of “new” is so important in Scripture. It is the way God makes things. It also emphasizes the forgiveness we have in Jesus that contrasts with our old sinful self.

No one could learn the song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they remained virgins. They follow the Lamb wherever He goes.

We have already seen that the 144,000 is not emphasizing a specific, limited number, but that it is complete. They are with the Lamb, Jesus, who has called them through faith in Him. “Virgins” does not mean only the celibates are saved. This is talking about “spiritual virginity,” those who follow God, not idols. God gave the command in Genesis when He created man and woman, “Be fruitful and multiply.” In the Old Testament,

however, the worship of idols—“idolatry”—is equated with “adultery”—polluting a marriage. We think of the relationship of Hosea and his wife, who was unfaithful to him. This symbolized Israel’s unfaithfulness to God. Yet as God told Hosea to win back his wife, God has won us back in His Son Jesus.

They were purchased from among mankind and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb. No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless.

What makes them blameless? They have been redeemed by Jesus. We are firstfruits; our lives are offered to God for Him to use to help others. John goes on, “No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless.” How can this be? It is because they have been, “purchased from among mankind.” Luther put it this way in his explanation to the creed that Jesus has:

“Purchased and won me from all sin, death and the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and His innocent suffering and death.”

In chapter 19 we encounter the great multitude again:

After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting: “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are His judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of His servants.” And again they shouted: “Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever.”

The adulteress is the idolatry that tempts us to go astray from God. In Biblical times there were often pagan gods. Today our “idols” are things like money and success.

The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God, who was seated on the throne. And they cried: “Amen, Hallelujah!” Then a voice came from the throne, saying: “Praise our God, all you His servants, you who fear Him, both great and small!” Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: “Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.” (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God’s holy people.)

The 24 elders in both the Old and New Testament Church, since it is two times twelve which is the number for the Church. They are seen first in chapter four around the throne of God. Along with them is the great multitude, the whole crowd of all believers, including you and me, who worship God.

The fine linen tells us that the people in this crowd are forgiven. This forgiveness did not happen because we are internally clean (sinless), but because we are covered by Jesus’ sinlessness and are seen that way by God. We call this “alien righteousness” because it is Jesus’, not ours.

Why is that so important? Note these words from St. Paul in Romans 7 about his own life experience:

As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Though the sin we experience says we are sinners and condemns us, Jesus' sacrifice covers us so we trust His word that says, "You are forgiven." That is something we struggle with each day.

We are the 144,000. We are the great multitude. As we face so many things that hurt and condemn us, Revelation gives us the certain hope of what we really are—God's forgiven people. And we are not alone. As we give our feeble praise to God we are echoed by the praise going on in heaven which we sing about in our communion services:

Therefore with angels and archangels and all the host (army) of heaven we laud and magnify Your glorious name, evermore praising You and singing.