



As we start a new chapter, let me start with a summary quote.

“After the apostle John was told in vision about this group of 144,000 individuals, he was shown another group. John describes this second group as ‘a great crowd, which no man was able to number, out of all nations and tribes and peoples and tongues.’ This great crowd refers to those who will survive the coming ‘great tribulation,’ which will destroy the present wicked world...The context of Revelation 7:4 and related statements found elsewhere in the Bible bear out that the number 144,000 is to be taken literally. It refers to those who will rule in heaven with Christ over a paradise earth, which will be filled with a large and undetermined number of happy people who worship...God”

What do you think—is that a helpful summary? I intentionally left out one word at the end. “People who worship Jehovah God. This quote was taken from the *Watchtower*, the official magazine of the Jehovah Witnesses. This quote is confusing because it doesn’t clarify their belief that only 144,000 will be saved and that they must be from among their own tribe. It must be so frustrating to be a Jehovah Witness. Salvation is dependent upon constantly telling others about their twisted understanding of Jehovah. But the more people they tell, the more likely one of those people will out work them and push them out of the 144,000.

Their false and dangerous beliefs are to be soundly rejected by Bible believing followers of Christ. But Jehovah Witnesses are not the only ones who have differing views on the 144,000. If you have been in church for any length of time you have most likely heard at least one interpretation of this number. In the book of Revelation, it is probably second only to the number 666 in terms of a variety of theories. You’ve heard of the third rail of politics? The third rail of a subway carries 660 volts of electricity and will fry you if you touch it. In politics, the third rail is the most controversial issue and if you get too close to it, it could end your political career. I am not suggesting that the myriad of viewpoints on this chapter are heretical like the Jehovah Witnesses, but this passage does tend to be the third rail of preaching. In other words, preach it at your own peril. ;-)

Thankfully, you are all gracious and won't rush the stage while I am preaching. Seriously, I do appreciate the grace you have shown me as we navigate these waters together. But this passage is another reminder that we won't all agree on our interpretations. I would say that our time in this book has sparked as many or more conversations about the text than any other book I have preached. So many of you are really engaged in discovering the truth, and that's awesome.

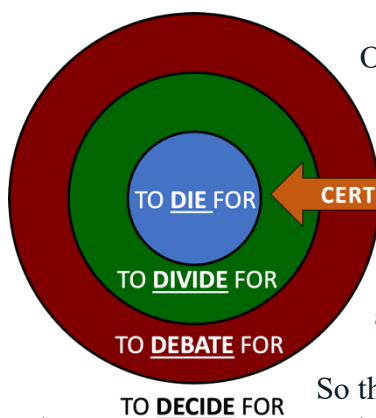
Recently we had another ordination and licensing council where pastoral candidate submit a paper on their doctrinal views and then give an oral defense of their views by being asked a ton of questions. Seth will be doing this on the 25th in Plover. He has written a 20-page paper and will sit and answer questions for 2.5-3 hours. For Seth, licensing is step one and once he receives that, he can start on the longer ordination process. So please pray for him. I am not on the Plover council so I get to go and encourage Seth and don't have to ask him any tough questions. ;-).

While the council members were eating lunch together, one of the pastors said this in front of everyone. "Rich, I think you're too dogmatic to be in the Free Church." He said it tongue in cheek, but he also meant it to make a statement. Those are really strong words and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't shocked. The implication was that not only should I too dogmatic to be serving on the ordination council, but I probably shouldn't even be a pastor in the Free Church. So yeah, I was shocked. Let me provide a little context. We were discussing candidates position on creation. I tend to be the guy on the council who asks the creation questions because I have clear convictions. But I had just told the men how I introduced the very first sermon when I preached through Genesis many years ago.

Point #1—Why I am a young earth creationist.

Point #2—Why I am glad young earth creationism is not in our statement of faith (but sometimes I wish it were).

Let me briefly explain. Point one was just my clear conviction. I wanted everyone to know my position at the start of the book. Point two was my way of illustrating the tension with such beliefs. I truly am glad that young earth creationism is not in our statement of faith. As confident as I am in my belief, I don't think holding this position is necessary to be a member in our church.



Of course I am referring to what I call the Concentric Circle of Certainty. Young earth creationism is not in my center circle or even the "to divide for" circle. Having said that, I think that an old earth position is fraught with dangers and inconsistencies that can cloud the way you view and interpret lots of Scripture. That's why I care about it and why I ask questions on the council. I am trying to get the pastors to think more deeply about it. But it should not keep them from being ordained.

So there is a healthy tension here and my parenthesis in point #2 was trying to capture that tension. It would be "easier" if we took a position because we could eliminate the need for so much debate and discussion. This is true of so many beliefs. We

don't take a position on the Calvinist-Arminian debate, how the sovereignty of God and man's free will intersect. Here as well, it would be "easier" to have a clear position in our statement of faith because this issue tends to be even more contentious than the creation issue. We could eliminate all potential contentiousness and tension by choosing one side or the other. But in my opinion, that would just cause unnecessary division so it's not worth it.

So this is how I explained to this pastor that I don't think I'm overly dogmatic at all. I explained how this diagram and the principles it represents is one of my heartbeats as a pastor and preacher. It is so important that we understand these categories and also that we know where our beliefs should be placed. If most or all of your beliefs fit in the middle, you will be a legalist but if almost none of your beliefs are in the middle, then you are a theological liberal. There are serious dangers on both sides. And this is how we should continue to approach the book of Revelation. Again, I feel like this IS the way our church has been handling it, at least based on the feedback I have been receiving. So this is not a chastisement but rather an encouragement to stay on this healthy trajectory.

With that in mind, here are three things we should all strongly agree about.

Jesus is the hero of this book.
If we believe it, it will bring us hope and encouragement.
If we believe it, we will tell others about Jesus.

Sorry for that long introduction to this chapter, but it seemed like a good time to talk about it.

Before we read chapter seven, let me talk about the title of this message. Who Can Stand? This is taken from the very end of chapter six. Understanding the end of chapter six is crucial for understanding chapter seven, so let's read that again first.

¹² When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, ¹³ and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. ¹⁴ The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. ¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, ¹⁶ calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, ¹⁷ for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

Who can stand? These are words on the mouths of terrified unbelievers facing the pure wrath of God. The sixth seal is the full wrath when Christ returns. We talked about this a few weeks ago. Remember when I illustrated this with the hymn, *It is Well with My Soul*?

And Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend
Even so, it is well with my soul!

We agreed that these lyrics are biblically accurate. After the sky rolls back like a scroll, the Lord will descend. It's possible because of the recapitulation, the repeating and crescendo throughout the book. The shaking of the heavens is repeated at the seventh bowl. Though he is not announced like he is in chapter nineteen, Jesus returns in his full battle array, which is why the terror level is as high as it could possibly be. The people hiding in caves are begging for a landslide to bury them alive rather than reckon with "the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb." "Bury us, kill us, just don't let the wrath of God come near to us!" And the chapter closes with these terrifying words on their lips—Who can stand?

Can anyone stand such wrath? Who can stand? It's a question borne out of petrifying fear on the lips of unbelievers, but it's still a great question. It's a question that is answered in chapter seven.

After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree. ² Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, ³ saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads." ⁴ And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel:

⁵ 12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed,

12,000 from the tribe of Reuben,

12,000 from the tribe of Gad,

⁶ 12,000 from the tribe of Asher,

12,000 from the tribe of Naphtali,

12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh,

⁷ 12,000 from the tribe of Simeon,

12,000 from the tribe of Levi,

12,000 from the tribe of Issachar,

⁸ 12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun,

12,000 from the tribe of Joseph,

12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed.

⁹ After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the

Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" 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, ¹² saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" ¹⁴ I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

¹⁵ "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.
¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
the sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.
¹⁷ For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

There are so many questions here! ;-)

Who are the 144,000?

What does it mean that they are sealed?

If there are only 144,000, then who are the “great multitude that no one could number” in verse nine? But let’s start with the question from chapter six—who can stand? Can anyone stand in the path of God’s wrath?

As I said, this chapter answers that vital question. The short answer is that only those are sealed by God can stand in the midst of the wrath of God. Don’t forget that believers and unbelievers both go through the seven-year tribulation. Even if you believe that the church will be raptured away before the tribulation, we know that countless will be saved during the tribulation. Therefore, believers will go through the tribulation. The unbelievers receive the full outpouring of God’s wrath, but believers are protected because they are sealed by God. Let me explain how I understand this chapter and then I will back up and explain how I got there. Verses 1-8 occur before the six seals are opened in chapter six and verses 9-17 occur after the sixth seal is opened.

We know that no one can stand in the presence of the wrath of God. Therefore, these believers must have received God’s seal prior to God’s wrath, otherwise they could not stand either. Now you might be confused because verse one reads, *After this I saw four angels*. So the word after would tell us that the events of chapter seven happened after the events of chapter six. But remember, Revelation is told from John’s perspective, in the order that things were revealed to him. The events of chapter seven were told to John after the events of chapter six but that doesn’t mean the events followed in strict chronological order.

Remember the lens through which we are viewing the book. “The unity of John’s book ... is neither chronological nor arithmetical, but artistic, like that of a musical theme with variations, each variation adding something new to the significance of the whole composition.” John is painting a picture. He is creating a musical score. Of course chronology matters in places. Obviously, Jesus must first take the scroll in chapter five before he opens the seals in chapter six but there are large swaths of this book where a strict chronology is not only not necessary, but it would be more confusing.

The sealing of believers has to occur before God’s wrath and I believe that the 144,000 represents all believers, not a literal 144,000 Jews. First of all, why would only 144,000 be sealed when all believers will be sealed and must be sealed. In chapter nine the crazy scorpions are sent to the earth and we read about protection for believers. “They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads.” The seal of God on their foreheads is the same seal we see here in

chapter seven. “Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.” In both cases, all believers are sealed to protect them from God’s wrath. If it were only a select number of Jews who were sealed, what about the rest of the Jewish believers and all of the non-Jewish believers? What would their fate be if they were not also sealed by God?

Not to mention the fact that chapter fourteen says that the 144,000 are men who have not defiled themselves with women. Therefore, no women will be sealed during the tribulation, only celibate men. That seems a bit odd to me for a lot of reasons.

A common interpretation is that the 144,000 are Jews from the twelve tribes who will be witnesses on the earth to share the gospel. Here is the one summary statement. “Their mission seems to be to evangelize the post-rapture world and proclaim the gospel during the tribulation period.” The only problem is that this passage says nothing about the 144,000 being witnesses. Moreover, why would witnesses be limited to just these 144,000? Wouldn’t virtually every believer be witnessing during these daunting days?

The final chapter of the book gives this precious promise. “They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.” This is clearly referring to all believers. So we have some passages that refer to the 144,000 as being sealed and others just as clearly stating that all believers will be sealed. Since it is necessary for all believers to be sealed and protected from God’s wrath, it makes more sense to me to see the 144,000 as symbolic for all believers. One pastor described it this way. “There is a lesson in God’s protection for the witnesses. If his power is sufficient to preserve them during the worst days this world has ever known, we can be confident in his ability to protect us today.”ⁱ To that I would say, but what about all of the other believers who are not sealed by God? How will they survive? It’s not just the 144,000 who will be sealed but all believers who will be sealed.

It’s similar to how the Israelites were protected during the Passover. “The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 12:13) All of the Israelites were sealed/marked in such a way that the destroying angel would pass over them. Here is one such angel in chapter fourteen. “So the angel swung his sickle across the earth and gathered the grape harvest of the earth and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. ²⁰ And the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse's bridle, for 1,600 stadia.” We would ask the same question the unbelievers ask at the end of chapter six—who can stand? Who can stand against the sickle being swung across the earth and harvesting the winepress of the wrath of God? The answer? Those who have the seal of God on their foreheads.

In this way, everyone on the earth is sealed. The unbelievers are sealed with the mark of the beast and the believers are sealed with God’s name on their foreheads. The earth-dwellers are sealed for judgment, and the heaven-dwellers are sealed for salvation.ⁱⁱ

In many ways, what will be true then is true now. Believers are protected from God’s wrath yet still experience pain, trials and death. That is true now and will be true during the tribulation,

except that the temperature will be turned up to high while right now we are only on simmer. What is the purpose of trials and pain now versus trials and pain then? Every bit of it is for our good. Now I am not calling global war, plague and starvation good, but evil things then can be for our good just as they are this very day.

This relatively unknown hymn by the former slave trader, John Newton, is a powerful reminder of how trials and suffering are for our good and God's glory.

I asked the Lord that I might grow
In faith and love and ev'ry grace
Might more of His salvation know
And seek more earnestly His face

'Twas He who taught me thus to pray
And He, I trust, has answered prayer
But it has been in such a way
As almost drove me to despair

I hoped that in some favored hour
At once He'd answer my request
And, by His love's constraining pow'r
Subdue my sins and give me rest

Instead of this, He made me feel
The hidden evils of my heart
And let the angry pow'rs of hell
Assault my soul in ev'ry part

Yea, more with His own hand He seemed
Intent to aggravate my woe
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed
Humbled my heart and laid me low

"Lord, why is this," I trembling cried
"Wilt Thou pursue Thy worm to death?"
"'Tis in this way," the Lord replied
"I answer prayer for grace and faith."

"These inward trials I employ
From self and pride to set thee free
And break thy schemes of earthly joy
That thou may'st find thy all in Me."

-John Newton, 1779

Rich Maurer

October 16, 2022

ⁱ <https://davidjeremiah.blog/the-144000-in-the-book-of-revelation/>

ⁱⁱ Osborne, G. R. (2002). [*Revelation*](#) (p. 302). Baker Academic.