

"See the Salvation of All 'Israel'"

As you may be aware, the book of Revelation is one of the most misunderstood and misapplied books of the Bible. What is true of the entire book of Revelation, is also true of the small portion of the book that serves as our sermon text today. While it is intended to be a word of comfort and encouragement, it has been misunderstood and misused by many, often in ways that give little comfort or encouragement. While it uses unique and vivid imagery, which may be difficult to understand, the whole point of this section of Revelation is that through it we might see the salvation of all Israel.

This final book of the Bible was written around 95 AD. The author is John, who had been one of Jesus' closest disciples. But late in his life, John was exiled because of his testimony about Jesus. He was sent to the island of Patmos, and during his time there, he received a vision, or more accurately, a series of visions, from God. John was inspired by the Holy Spirit to record these visions. What he wrote has been preserved for us in the book of Revelation.

Two points here are important for us to keep in mind. The first is the reality of persecution. Not only was John being persecuted because of what he believed and taught, but so were many who would read his words. They were witnessing all too clearly what Jesus had predicted, that the world would hate his followers and would attack and persecute them. The message of Revelation is one of hope and comfort.

The second important factor that helps us to properly understand Revelation is that it was a series of visions. God allowed John to see fantastic images and vivid scenes, many of which were highly symbolic. For example, they pictured Jesus at times as a son of man wearing white and gold, and at other times as a lamb looking as though it had been slain. These pictures tell us about Jesus: that he is perfect and holy, the royal ruler over all things, and that he had died as the substitute for all of the people of the world.

In these picturesque and vivid visions, John saw both death and destruction as well as life and salvation. He saw repeatedly how the battle between God and the devil over the souls of human beings would continue throughout the history of the world. He saw how the battle would ultimately result in the defeat and destruction of the devil and his followers. And he saw how the day of the Lord's triumph would also mean the salvation of God's people.

Our text is a small part of one of the longer visions recorded by John. In this vision, John saw a scroll which was sealed with seven seals. No one was able to or permitted to open the seals and to read the scroll. But then the lamb appeared in the vision, who was able to open the scroll and its seals. The sealed scroll represents the future of the Church, a future which only God can know, but a future that he revealed to John and to us in these visions. Over the course of the opening of the seals, John sees visions of war and famine, pestilence and persecution on the earth. His visions offer a picture of the history of the world up to the final day of judgment. And as that final judgment is about to unfold, John sees the events recorded in our sermon text.

First he sees four angels. The four angels stand at the four corners of the earth and hold back four winds. Clearly four is an important number here. Four as it is found throughout the book of Revelation is the number of the earth. The four corners of the earth don't represent some outdated notion of a flat earth. Instead they represent all of the earth, the way we might refer to the four points of a compass. The four winds are the forces of destruction that will overtake the whole world on the Last Day. That destruction will also result in the destruction of unbelievers. But these forces are being held back. Angels of God are keeping them at bay until the time is right, and the time won't be right until the servants of God are sealed on the forehead.

This seal is the mark of God's ownership. It goes on God's people. This seal is nothing other than God's gracious preservation of his people in faith until the last day. Just as he called his people to faith, so God preserves them in that faith. This is a glimpse of good news for John. In the midst of war and famine and pestilence and persecution, God guards and keeps his people. He has placed his seal on them.

And the number of people who are sealed is 144,000. That is a very interesting number. Depending on your perspective, it may be a very big number. It is more people than fit into Arizona Stadium on game day, and similarly more than would fit into most athletic venues today. But it is also a very small number compared to the number of people in the world today, and even the number of professing Christians. It is a number that deserves a closer look. Like many numbers in Revelation, this number has a good deal of symbolic significance. We find it is split up into 12 groups of 12,000, with each group coming from a tribe of Israel.

Some take this number literally to refer to a specific 144,000 people. That means, based on a strictly literal understanding of these words, that they must also be descendants from the Israelite tribes mentioned. And based on this understanding, people assume that this number of modern Jews will convert to Christianity just prior to the end of the world. While we pray that many Jews might come to know Jesus as the Messiah and the Savior of the world, God is not here promising that they will. Nor is he saying that there is a special class, a limited number who will live with him in the highest heavenly state, while others will enjoy a lesser blessing in eternity as some have supposed. Nor do we have time to go into all of the other false ideas about the 144,000.

Instead, let's look again at this number of people. While they come from tribes of Israel, the tribes are listed here in a way that is highly unusual in the rest of Scripture. The tribe of Levi is included in the list, even though that tribe never had an inheritance in the land of Israel and is not listed as one of the twelve tribes elsewhere. The tribe of Joseph is listed here, along with one of his sons, Manasseh. But in Israelite history, Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh gave their names to two tribes of Israel, and Joseph did not. Even the order of the tribes is unique as Judah is placed first even though he is nowhere else in Scripture found first among the tribes. This is a unique list, which helps us understand that it is symbolic not of the tribes themselves, but of something that the tribes represent: believers, all the people of God.

In fact, much of the New Testament speaks of a spiritual Israel made up of all believers. Paul in Romans says that Gentiles will come in to the people of God **"and in this way all Israel will be saved"** (11:26). All Israel will be saved; the spiritual Israel made up of believers will be preserved in faith until the last day.

So why is all Israel 144,000 people? 12 is a number that in Revelation indicates the Church, the result of God's gracious working in the world. The Old Testament Church is represented by 12 tribes, and the New Testament by 12 apostles. The number 10 is a number of completeness, and is often found in multiples like 100 or 1,000. So 12 times 12,000 represents the complete number of God's elect, even if that number in reality is more than we would be able to count or estimate.

But we're not here for a math lesson. And we're not here to talk about the ways in which the book of Revelation has been subject to misunderstanding. We're here to find comfort and encouragement. We're here, as we admitted in the confession of sins, bowed down and humbled by our wrongdoings and troubled by our sins. We freely acknowledge that we deserve destruction. We're here to take comfort in the fact that God preserves his Church. He sent his dear Son to die to take away the sins of the world. He sent his Holy Spirit into sinful hearts that they might believe the good news. He promises that not even the gates of hell itself can overcome his Church.

And to prove it, he's given us a glimpse. He's given us a preview of the end of the world and the destruction that is to come. With John we look at this vision. We should cower in fear over the destruction that it predicts, but God's angels are there to preserve us. God has placed his seal on our foreheads, saying, "You are mine." And he will keep us as his own in this world and into the next.

Revelation is a difficult book to understand when you expect it to say something different from the rest of the Bible. It doesn't. It tells us what the rest of the Bible does: that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. It tells us that God is building his Church on that solid rock and that nothing will overcome it. It tells us that we as believers in the lamb who was slain are the true Israel and that we will be saved by God's grace and power.

The Text: Revelation 7:1–8 (NIV84)

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. ² 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: ³ “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.” ⁴ Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.

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

from the tribe of Reuben 12,000,

from the tribe of Gad 12,000,

⁶ from the tribe of Asher 12,000,

from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000,

from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000,

⁷ from the tribe of Simeon 12,000,

from the tribe of Levi 12,000,

from the tribe of Issachar 12,000,

⁸ from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000,

from the tribe of Joseph 12,000,

from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000.