

## **Lesson 3: Revelation 7**

**Opening Question:** What's the worst thing that has ever happened to you because of your faithfulness to the word of God or your commitment to Christ?

**Opening Prayer:** As we read today about dark and terrible things, remind us that Jesus is Lord and he has won, is winning and will win. Amen!

### **The 144,000**

#### **Read aloud Revelation 7:1-8**

You may have heard the number 144,000 as the number of those who are saved; that out of all time and places, only 144,000 people will be received into eternal life in the presence of God. Is that what this chapter is about?

Thankfully, no.

#### **Read aloud Wright:**

The created order needs to be purified, it seems, in this case by a violent wind which will scorch the earth, stir up the sea and uproot trees. Like the other symbols of divine judgment, these images from the natural world are to be taken symbolically in terms of the great shaking that will pass through the whole world of human affairs as God's judgments start to take hold. While that is about to happen, God's people need to be reassured that they will come safely through, marked on their foreheads with the special seal that declares that they belong to God and are not to be harmed.

Not that they will escape suffering. Most readers of Revelation (not all) agree that the list of people who are 'sealed' in this way in verses 4 – 8 refers to the same people who are then described as a great, uncountable crowd in verses 9 – 17. As with the lion and the lamb in chapter 5, we notice that John hears the number – 144,000, broken down into twelve twelves – but then, when he looks (verse 9), he sees the great, uncountable crowd. This strongly suggests that they are the same people, symbolically represented as the complete people of God (twelve thousand times twelve), but actually consisting of a much larger number which nobody could count. And the people in this great crowd, as we shall see, have not escaped suffering. They have come through it to safety the other side, as Jesus himself passed through death to the immortal physical life of resurrection.

We should not suppose, then, that this 144,000 consists simply of ethnic Jews. For John, the people of God now consists of all those, including of course the Jews who remain at the heart of the family, who believe in Jesus, who acknowledge him as Lord.

Just as the New Jerusalem has the names of the twelve tribes of Israel inscribed on its gates (while the foundations have the names of the twelve apostles) (21.12–14), so here the twelve tribes do not indicate ethnic Jews over against a large crowd of Gentile Christians in verses 9–17, any more than the description of that great crowd in verses 14–17 in particular should be thought to apply to Gentile Christians only, not to Jewish followers of the Messiah. Rather, as always, John is using the rich symbolism of Israel's identity to mark out those who, through the Messiah, belong to God's renewed and rescued people, no matter what their ancestry (70-71).

The point of the present passage, coming as it does in the pause between the opening of the sixth and the seventh seals, is to affirm that even though evil must be allowed to come to its full height, in order eventually to be fully and finally overthrown, God will not allow this process to put in jeopardy the ultimate rescue of his true people. This true people, redefined as they are around the lion of Judah, are to be marked out. The events around them will no doubt be terrifying, but they may rest assured that God has them in his care (72).

**Optional discussion questions:**

John is writing to churches that are enduring and will endure persecution and suffering, and there is throughout Revelation a straight-forward acknowledgement that the followers of Jesus will suffer. As people who worship someone who is crucified, we know this to be true.

1. Why, then, do we so often receive suffering in our lives as an anomaly?
2. Why does suffering often make us question God?

**Read aloud Revelation 7:9-17**

Wright says:

This vision, then, is the thing which John 'sees' (verse 9), after having 'heard' the list of the 144,000 in verses 4-8. Formally speaking, this is the complete people of God, twelve times twelve times a thousand. In reality, this is a huge throng which nobody could ever count (think of the journalists' estimates of a great crowd filling a city square; then multiply that crowd by a few hundred, or a few thousand, so that the counters simply give up with a smile). Clothed in white, for victory and purity, this crowd is carrying palm branches as a further sign of victory celebration, and they can't restrain their enthusiasm: they are shouting out their delight and praise and thanks to God and the lamb, because they have won the victory which has brought them their rescue.

The word 'salvation' in verse 10 literally means 'rescue'. But often in the Old Testament the word seems to mean 'the victory through which rescue is won'. So it seems to be here. The shout of praise continues into verse 12, where the great crowd of the redeemed recognize with joy that everything good, noble, powerful and wise comes from God himself. In technical language, this is what true monotheism looks like:

not a bare, dry acknowledgement that there is only one God, but the uninhibited shout of praise to the God from who all blessings flow (74).

And more besides: because at this point John glimpses the further future, the vision of the New Jerusalem itself. We are not there yet, because there is still a ‘temple’ here, and there won’t be one in the final city (21.22). But, as so often in Revelation (and in Christian thinking generally), present and future overlap and interlock in various confusing ways, and already some of the blessings of the final city are to be experienced by these people – by these people who, John is eager to say, are *you*, you who are about to suffer in Ephesus, or Smyrna, or Pergamum, or wherever. God will protect them from the elements, and from hunger and thirst (the same promise given by Jesus to the crowds in John 6:35). And, in a wonderful role reversal, the lamb will turn into a shepherd, assuming the royal role of John 10 (the ‘good shepherd’) and indeed the divine role of Psalm 23 (God as the shepherd who leads his people to springs of living water).

And, in the final anticipation of the New Jerusalem (21.4), God himself ‘will wipe away every tear from their eyes’. There is an intimacy about that promise which speaks volumes for the whole vision of God throughout the book. Yes, God is rightly angry with all those who deface his beautiful creation and make the lives of their fellow humans miserable and wretched. But the reason he is angry is because, at his very heart, he is so full of mercy that his most characteristic action is to come down from the throne and, in person, wipe away every tear from every eye. Learning to think of this God when we hear the word ‘God’, rather than instantly thinking of a faceless heavenly bureaucrat or a violent celestial bully, is one of the most important ways in which we are to wake up from the nightmare and embrace the reality of God’s true day (75-76).

### Optional Discussion Questions:

Revelation 7:9-10 is a vision of the kingdom that has long animated the work of Christians toward embracing believers of all races, languages, ethnicities, and nations.

1. When have you been in a worship setting that reminded you of this vision?
2. What personal worship preferences do you have that may inhibit you from living into this vision here on earth?
3. How can your worship (on campus, in your church, in your dorm, on your own) continue to stretch you toward this vision of the kingdom?

A favorite image for many of us is that of Revelation 7:17: “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

1. What pain do you carry that you are eager to have “wiped away”?
2. How does this image of God affect how you pray?

### **Closing Prayer**

Thank you, Jesus, that we can worship you in different languages and styles, some quiet, some loud, some still, some active. Thank you that our worship is enriched when we learn from the worship cultures of others. Help us to soften our hearts to the worship preferences of others, and never think that “our” way is the right way. Together we all long for the day when every tongue, tribe and nation will be gathered around your throne, celebrating the One who has wiped all of our tears away. Amen.